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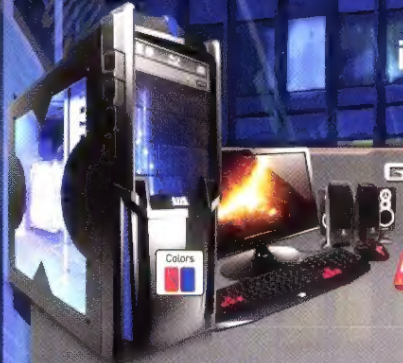

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The big two-fifty

I looked it up, and it's a "sestercentennial." I like that a whole lot more than "bicenquinquagenary," which is apparently a real word (http://bit.ly/howisthisaword) and not an enemy from *Diablo*. Both are fancy ways of saying that we're 250 magazines old. It's inspiring to see all those issues stacked beside each other on our shelves here (and hey, you should show us your collection at letters@pcgamer.com), but it's even more exciting to realize that, a quarter-thousand issues in, we're gaming in an incredible time.

The advent of Valve's trinity Steam Machines, SteamOS, and Steam Controller is about to make playing PC games in the living room easier, something that could have a transformative effect on what being a PC gamer means. 2014 for us is in large part about exploring, experiencing, and investigating this, beginning in a feature next month all about the future of PC gaming, and then throughout the year as we evaluate and test Valve's new OS, how well the controller performs with different games, and the Steam Machines themselves.

We'll also be embarking on a redesign in 2014 of the magazine, so now's a wonderful time to let us know what you'd like to read each month. We're always listening at letters@pcgamer.com.

EVAN LAHTI
EXECUTIVE EDITOR
evan@pcgamer.com
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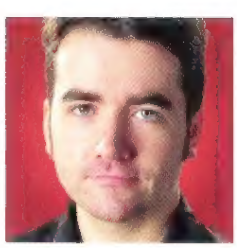
BRINGING YOU THE SCOOPS THIS MONTH...

Tyler Wilde
@tyler_wilde
Talked to Chris Roberts over video call, insisted he was "being hailed by a friendly vessel."

Cory Banks
@demiurge
Punched Batman in his chiseled, perfect jaw, and continued to jam out Tom Petty songs on *Rocksmith*.



Chris Thursten
@cthursten
Was one of the first people in the world to play *Alien: Isolation*, and the only one to escape alive.

PC GAMER (ISSN: 1080-4471) is published 13 times a year, monthly plus Holiday issue following December issue by Future US, Inc., 4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080. Phone: (650) 872-1642. Fax (650) 872-2207. Website: www.futureus.com. Periodicals postage paid in San Bruno, CA and at additional mailing offices. Newsstand distribution is handled by Time Warner Retail. Basic subscription rates (12 issues): US Digital $29.99. Print $19.99. Canada: Digital $23.88. Print $29.95. Int: Digital $23.88. Print $39.95. Canadian and foreign orders must be prepaid. US funds only. Canadian price includes postage and GST #R128220688. PMA #40612608. Subscriptions do not include newsstand only specials. POSTMASTER: Send changes of address to PC Gamer, PO Box 5852, Harlan, IA 51593-1352. Standard Mail Enclosure in the following editions: None. Ride-Along Enclosure in the following editions: None. Returns: Pitney Bowes, PO Box 25542, London, ON N6C 6B2, Canada. Future US, Inc. also publishes 3DGamer, Cricket Today, MacLife, Maximum PC, and The Official Xbox Magazine. Entire contents copyright 2014, Future US, Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part is prohibited. Future US, Inc. is not affiliated with the companies or products covered in PC Gamer. Reproduction of the articles and pictures in this magazine is illegal without the prior written consent of PC Gamer. Products named in the pages of PC Gamer are trademarks of their respective companies. PRODUCED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA. We encourage you to recycle this magazine, either through your usual household recyclable waste collection service or at a recycling site.

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Your favorite games of 2013, living room solutions, and movie malaise

SPK UR MND

- My laptop crashed today and won't boot up. It was very hot and there was a strange smell. Any help on how to fix it?
Arthur Drozdov
We don't mean to sound unsympathetic, Arthur, but what you're describing is as bad as it sounds. Take it to a professional—there's a small chance it's salvageable. At the least, you may get your files back and be the proud owner of a very expensive hot plate.

- You were killed by a snake. You were killed by a spike. You were killed by an arrow you didn't see. You were killed by your own rock.
Seth Hoffman
Coincidentally, "Killed By Our Own Rock" is the name of PC Gamer's new prog rock band.

- *PC Gamer* totally convinced me to get *XCOM: Enemy Within*. Sure *Enemy Unknown* was already the cat's pajamas, but this makes it better? Clutch!
Aram
If Enemy Unknown is the cat's pajamas, then clearly Enemy Within is the bee's knees. Put them together and you get a pair of cat pajamas full of bee knees. A bit grotesque, but that's just how much we like it.

- Seriously, guys, *Path of Exile*.
R. Anderson
We like it too. (pg. 64)

- *Best game of 2013:* Papers, Please.
Jacob Dieffenbach
I'm afraid we'll need to see a document proving that, Jacob.

The best of 2013

The best game of the year (of the ones that I played) was most definitely *Bioshock: Infinite*. With the heavy focus on a tightly crafted story, incredibly well designed, heavily stylized graphics, mind-blowing end game and high-flying action, it had everything an aging gamer could want. The only flaw in this masterpiece of a game was the combat mechanics, which were clunky and sometimes unresponsive, but since that wasn't the draw of this game it was forgivable.
Chris Reddie

Have you tried Hard mode? It doesn't reduce any clunkiness you experienced, but we preferred the tougher combat.
PCG

Being a PC gamer for over 10 years I haven't been playing games much due to work, but I am getting more and more into *BF4*. It still gives me the same feeling as when I played *BF2* with the "how did he, how on earth" feeling and "oh, how do you like that!"
Bruce G.

We're fond of the "did I do that?" feeling after miraculously capturing a point by ourselves or hitting a helicopter with an RPG. Urkel voice optional.
PCG

My favorite game of 2013 had to be *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*. There is nothing more fun than hopping ships and plundering loot as quickly as you can before returning to your ship and sinking the rest of their crew. I also enjoy the shanties my crew sings—it makes the atmosphere so much more happy and joyful.
Frank Smyth

Being a pirate made us so very happy. Being a pirate that is called upon to air assassinate ocelots made us even happier.
PCG

My favorite game was easily *DmC Devil May Cry*. Why? Because it's just pure fun start to finish. *DmC* is a veteran hack 'n slash series with exceptional controls, hilarious enemies, and an incredible soundtrack...The game manages platforming, combat, action, story, music, and character development all in a way that is designed to make you have fun, which is something missing outside of indie games these days.
Paul Webby

That's a pretty broad brush to paint all non-indie, non-DmC games with, but we won't deny that Dante is a fantastic delivery system for fun.
PCG

THE HOT MAIL

Reader's request

I'm typing this email in my game room sitting at a table about six feet from a 4k TV using a wireless Razer Ouroboros and a Logitech wireless solar powered keyboard. The TV is mounted on a projecting frame so I can easily change the distance in order to switch between more arcadie games like *Rogue Legacy* which can be easily played at a distance, and harder to read text like *Civilization V*'s HUD.

The logistics of being a PC gamer in the living room are complex and there are great ideas out there, but they are far from fully germinating. Gaming in this way makes playing hot seat *Civ V* and *Lego Lord of the Rings* co-op a lot more enjoyable than being cramped in a tiny desk with another person. It also makes playing *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* sort of a party game if you have a bunch of people in the room who name their own characters and tell the operator how they want their unit to react in combat.

All that aside, I do like to game without having to strain my eyes trying to read tiny text...I want the eye candy of a 4K TV but I want to read through the text in *Rise of Venice* without going blind.

A universal mod needs to be developed for PC games that allows zooming in for text reading similar to what Steam already does with Big Picture.

That said, I'm going to get *Age of Empires II HD* and see how it works with this new setup, but the true test will be *Rome: Total War II*. I want to see if I can find the balance between graphics and reading comfort. Game on!
Andres Zornosa

YOU'RE PLAYING

Guerric Haché
Currently playing:
Age of Empires II

Die, Ents!

Age of Empires II was arguably the defining game of my childhood, so when Hidden Path released an updated HD version that worked on modern computers and featured Steam integration, it was too good to pass up. Surprisingly, the graphics hold up, and the gameplay is of course as good as ever. The fact that they've thrown a brand new expansion pack in for the game, *The Forgotten*, is just icing on the cake.

I've since been overjoyed at the opportunity to dive back into the randomly generated medieval worlds of *AoE*, trashing my opponents with Hun cavalry, Briton archers, and Viking longboats. A continuously interesting variety of situations can occur when you throw together huge random maps, one of several gameplay modes, and multiple players with their own specializations.

AoE II has stayed interesting to me longer than any other game, and I think the success of its re-release shows I'm not the only one who feels that way. There were a lot of great games in 2013, but I was most happy to see the return of the king.

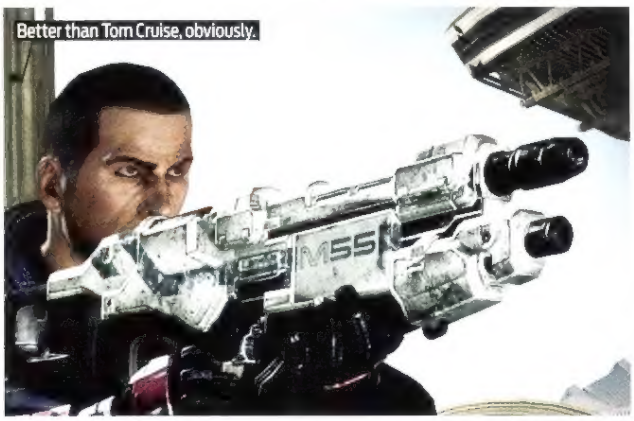
Rigged

What the hell do you guys do with all the rigs you build?! Because if they are sitting in a closet I will accept your gracious offer of giving me, a gamer in need of some charity, one of those special rigs.
Mark McCoy

Sorry, Mark, but after we build a rig, we disassemble it and incorporate its parts into the giant death robot we're secretly building in our underwater laboratory. So far it's just a pile of GPUs with googly eyes, but we're getting there. We'll rule Asgard one day.
PCG

Film burn

There was a time when movies thrilled me, especially big-budget blockbusters. Now I am bored halfway through nearly any movie. In one such blockbuster starring Tom Cruise, I found myself detached from every character, not really caring about the fate of the protagonists. "What has happened," I asked myself? Well, PC games have far exceeded films in terms of storytelling, character development, personal choice, and sheer scope. For instance, there is no comparison between a two-hour science fiction movie and a series like *Mass Effect*. Hollywood cannot keep up anymore, no matter how many reboots they throw at us! PC games are the ultimate in entertainment, and I blame them for making big-budget blockbusters boring.
Daniel Hendrix


Better than Tom Cruise, obviously.

It might be that your tastes have changed more than film—we're not sure games have in some way eclipsed film's capacity to tell stories or are even competing on the same plane. But as far as how we spend our time and money, they certainly are in competition, and like you we (of course) dedicate more of our precious time to PC gaming. Still, we're not going to replace the joy of being in the theater to see* Avengers *on opening night or rewatching* Gattaca *with replaying* Mass Effect. *We're just going to do all of them. At once. (We're still working on human cloning.)
PCG

Did you like *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug*?
Jeff C.

We're still not sure why Dr. Watson was fighting a dragon.
PCG

SPK UR MND

So many mad comments about this GOTY choice, lol.
Boss L
There's some fist-shaking, but we expected that—it wouldn't be a Game of the Year Award without dissenting opinions, which we value, and furious outrage, which we internalize and call upon when we need to do something terribly cruel in DayZ.

Are you out of your minds? Who picked Spelunky to be the BEST of 2013?
Funktapus
We assume we're talking to a funky octopus, so maybe we are out of our minds. Our Game of the Year Awards are a group effort—the winner, we feel, embodies our values as PC gamers and resonated with more of us than any other game this year.

For realzz??
Jordan Andonov
Yep.

Thanks to *PC Gamer* for having the balls to admit that *Spelunky* was the game you played and loved the most this year.
pacifictrim
No problem, but it didn't require genitals to celebrate a great game. There's no shame in Spelunky.

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THE PC GAMER VIEW OF THE WORLD

Out of this world

THE TOP STORY Explore a vast, unique universe in Hello Games' surprising *Joe Danger* follow-up

You know those vistas you see in sci-fi games? Twinkling stars, huge ringed planets, burning alien suns. Usually they're little more than a backdrop, a skybox to fool you into thinking you're on another world. But not in *No Man's Sky*, if Hello Games is to be believed. If you see something in the sky – from planets to individual stars – you can go there. It's ambitious as hell, especially for such a small studio, but if it pulls it off, this could be the space exploration sim we've always dreamed of.

More impressive still is that it's all procedurally generated. Your universe – every ocean floor, mountain, forest, and star constellation – will be unique to you. Each planet has its own ecology, wildlife, and dangers, and there's a strong chance you won't be at the top of the food chain. Hello Games is vague about specific game mechanics, but stresses that the focus is on exploration – although there will be action: we've seen brief glimpses of space combat and first-person shooting.

No Man's Sky's inspiration is science fiction, but not the kind we're used to seeing in games, with grey ships on black starfields. Hello cites artists like Jean "Moebius" Giraud and Chris Foss as inspiration for the game's striking visuals. To us, the game looks like the cover illustration of a well-thumbed 1970s science fiction novel come to life, and it's absolutely beautiful.

There will also be an online multiplayer element in *No Man's Sky*, but Hello Games hasn't yet reveal any details. Whether it'll be a persistent universe like *EVE* or something more local for groups of friends remains to be seen, but the prospect of exploring this universe with other people is incredibly exciting. In the trailer we see ships flying over the player's head as they explore on foot. Other players, perhaps? A message flashing up with the name of a player that has discovered a planet suggests there may be an element of claiming newfound worlds as your own, like a cosmic pioneer.

It's too early to say how successful *No Man's Sky* will be, but Hello's vision is impressively grand. It's quite telling that despite all the noise of the VGX awards, where a number of major games were shown, it was a game by a tiny UK indie studio that got people excited. ■

Andy Kelly

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FOR THE WIN

Ben Griffin feels we are all, like, randomly generated beings created by life's great algorithm, right?

"Spelunky wouldn't make sense as a game with handmade levels."

Want to learn how 2013's best game works? Darius Kazemi's web tool, **SPELUNKY GENERATOR LESSONS**, explains all

Spelunky pulses to the beat of procedural generation, but how does the technique work? Web wizard Darius Kazemi can tell you. At *tinysubversions.com*, he is posting a series of interactive tutorials detailing the game's genius level-generating algorithm.

Spelunky Generator Lessons uses modded *Spelunky* code as a visualization tool. Pressing R generates a level, pressing 1 picks new room templates, and pressing 2 fills it with obstacles.

"Even before [developer] Derek Yu released the source code to the original," he says, "I had disassembled the game and was active in the mod community...In particular, I was so impressed with the level generator that I just had to dig in and figure it out."

1 Thanks to *Spelunky*'s randomly generated levels, each playthrough of the game is unique.

Room with a view

Understanding is one thing, teaching others is very different indeed. Fortunately, Darius's lessons are clear and concise. The first concerns the "solution path." Each level is made of 16 rooms in a 4x4 grid. There are four room types: type one is a room with exits on the left and right; type two is a room with exits on the left, right and top; type three is a room with exits on the left, right and bottom (if there are two rooms above then it's guaranteed to have a top exit); and type four is an optional side room that isn't on the solution path. An algorithm determines which room type will spawn.

That algorithm is key. "I think [*Spelunky* is] entirely about encountering the unknown, improvising strategies, and discovering tactics to deal with it. *Spelunky* wouldn't make sense as a game with handmade levels," says Kazemi. Yu himself offers a different perspective: "I would say [*Spelunky*'s] appeal doesn't lie in the fact that the levels are randomly generated, but in the details of its implementation and the other systems that it interacts with."

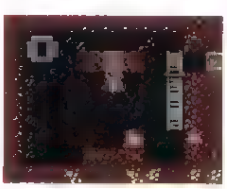
Part two of Spelunky Generator Lessons explains how individual rooms are laid out. Part three, where Kazemi will explain how traps and enemies are placed, is imminent. "Well, after I finish the book on *Jagged Alliance 2*, I'm hoping to put together part three. Aside from that, who knows! I don't usually plan out projects in advance. I'm in the shower or something, I think of a project, and then I sit down and finish it that same day." It seems that his work pattern is, in the tradition of *Spelunky*, random.

So what is Derek Yu's overall take on Spelunky Generator Lessons? "It's great! I love seeing people take apart the game, especially when that person is Darius Kazemi...For me, understanding how things work is a big part of enjoying them. I don't think *Spelunky* loses any of its 'magic' when its algorithms are laid out like this. This is *part* of the magic." For more, visit *tinysubversions.com/spelunkyGen*. ■

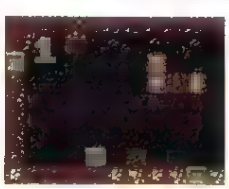
Ben Griffin

SPELUNKY TOWN

Four *Spelunky* room types



1 Starter
This is a starter room, with just one exit on the right. You know where you must go.



2 Three exits
This is a type two room, which will always have exits on the left, right and top.

3 Top exit
If there are two rooms above this, then it's guaranteed to have a top exit.

4 Optional
Type four is an optional side room that isn't part of the main solution path.

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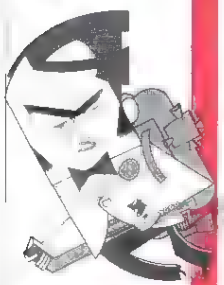

The Spy is a true patriot, but for the great and noble land of PC gaming

To prevent an expected leak of "target footage" which was definitely nothing to do with The Spy Ubisoft announced *Rainbow Six: Patriots* in 2011 via the medium of a pre-rendered faux game footage trailer. The game was said to feature the titular Six fighting homegrown terrorists in New York City. The twist? You'd get to play as the terrorists as well as the good guys: something The Spy is familiar with. He can embed himself in a terrorist cell with little more than a stick-on beard.

The latest from the publisher is that the troubled project is being remade. "We had a core team," is how Ubisoft's Laurent Detoc puts it. "They had a good vision. They got started, then the game wasn't working, so they started again." This could be good news, as it shows the pub wants to do the *Rainbow Six* name justice. Or it could be bad news, and the game is destined for development hell. The Spy suspects that certain staff changes at Ubisoft Montreal may have been part of the reason for the game's delay. Several team members were moved to other projects, including *Assassin's Creed IV*.

Earlier in 2013, a security expert who was definitely not The Spy revealed that he had been advising Ubisoft Montreal on "intelligence, terrorism, and counter-terrorism", so the game does still seem to be in development. Will it ever see the light of day? The Spy thinks so. *Rainbow Six* is one of the most recognized names in the Tom Clancy videogame series, and Ubisoft knows it. It won't let a property like that slip through its fingers. Unless The Spy infiltrates their headquarters and steals the microfilm it's stored on, of course.

Natural Selection 2 developer Unknown Worlds has revealed a mysterious new project called *Subnautica*, which it say combines elements of "roleplaying, sandbox, exploration, and cinematic games." In it you construct submarines and build technology to explore an underwater world populated by "creatures your imagination has never conceived of." They're being vague about how the game will play, but are saying, rather boldly, that they've invented a new genre. The Spy loved *Natural Selection*, so he has high hopes.

In 2012, 38 Studios was declared bankrupt and forced to close after finding themselves unable to keep up repayments on a $75 million loan from the Rhode Island government. In December an auction was held to sell off the company's properties, including those of its subsidiary, Big Huge Games. The rights to *Rise of Nations* and *Rise of Legends* were bought by an anonymous bidder, but *Kingdoms of Amalur*—an entirely decent action-RPG and the only game 38 ever completed sadly failed to sell. The Spy has covertly toppled many a corporation from the inside, but the unfortunate demise of 38 Studios is one of the worst he's ever encountered.

> "Expect *Fallout 4* to be set in the ruins of Boston."

Cliff "CliffyB" Bleszinski, who recently left Epic Games after 20 years with the company, is reportedly working on an old school arena type FPS in the vein of *Unreal Tournament* and *Quake III Arena*. "It's in my DNA," he told the Pointless Podcast. "I don't want to work with the old guard. The last thing I need is some marketing guy telling me these games don't sell well. A lot of these kids playing *Call of Duty*...I don't think they know what a proper arena shooter is." Bleszinski has a pitch for the project ready and even some concept art, so it may well see the light of day.

If casting documents allegedly received by Kotaku are to be believed, *Fallout 4* is real. The script is for a project called Institute—which fans immediately linked to The Institute, an organization from *Fallout* mythology and includes the famous lines: "War... war never changes." A mission is outlined, in which the player character teams up with a group called the Commonwealth Minutemen to repel a raider attack. Whether this is part of the game, or just an example for hiring voice actors, is unclear.

The name *Fallout* is never explicitly mentioned in the documents, but there are numerous references to the series' lore. Also of note is the casting director, who has previously worked on other Bethesda games, including *Skyrim* and *Dishonored*. The Spy also recalls rumors from 2012 that a team from Bethesda was at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology scouting out locations for the game. Expect *Fallout 4* to be set in the ruins of Boston. Spy out. ■

The Spy

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Roberts' space sim will have it all: spaceships, exploration, combat, and a persistent universe.

STAR CITIZEN

Chris Roberts' giant space sim grows hotter, bigger, and richer

Star Citizen is currently a star hangar. You can walk around a sparse, crisply-lit hall, admiring your spaceships and the fantastic fidelity of their cockpits: the moving parts, the data screens, the way your avatar's hand moves the joystick as you fiddle with WASD. But the ships sit heavy on the hangar floor, painfully grounded until the next big update.

The Star Citizen website, however, looks like the hub of a long-running game—a League of Legends-style phenomenon. Big inviting panels promote livestreams, developer profiles, letters from the chairman, fan art, FAQs, and patch notes. There are guides detailing intergalactic lore and forum threads that bustle with over one million posts about everything space.

There are already more then 300,000 residents of this online space empire, and they've spent over $34 million to make the fictional Roberts Space Industry a real industry in what feels like the twinkle of a star. And it all started with just a pitch and a name: let's build the next great PC space sim with Chris Roberts.

The creator of Wing Commander brings the project credibility and a universe-sized list of ideas. Star Citizen will be a single-player campaign, Squadron 42, in the vein of Wing Commander. It will feature a persistent shared universe, complete with a simulated economy, dogfighting, exploration (both on and off planets), and first-person shooting on and off ships—even in space.

> **It started with a pitch and a name: build the next great PC space sim with Chris Roberts.**

And the ships will be full of moving parts, with intricate physics simulation and damage modeling, customizable components, and power and heat systems similar in detail to Mechwarrior Online's mechs. All this and more, and I begin to wonder if even $34 million is enough. Apparently it is.

"We're pretty efficient, or frugal," says Roberts. "We don't really have any corporate overheads. Pretty much everybody is a developer."

Those developers are split between five teams in studios dotted around the world, from Montreal to Manchester, all working on pieces of the whole: the hangar, the dogfighting, the planetside exploration, the MMO back end, and the first-person shooter combat. To keep this rapidly expanding operation churning out bits of space, Cloud Imperium is selling its most valuable products. They look a lot like virtual spaceships, but they're actually made of dreams.

"I think people view the spaceship and its role as an extension of themselves," says Roberts. "They view themselves as an explorer finding new systems, or as this infamous pirate terrorizing the trading lanes. So the ship becomes an extension of the fantasy of who they are going to be in space."

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Cloud Imperium Games

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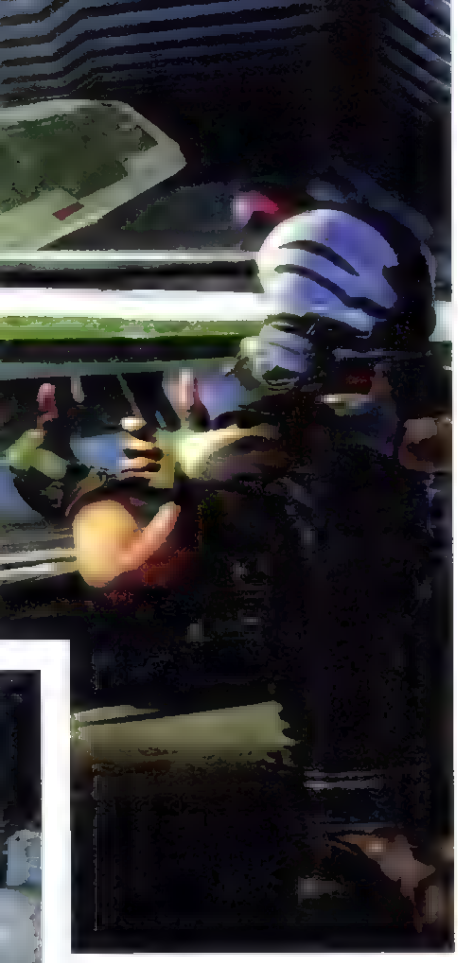
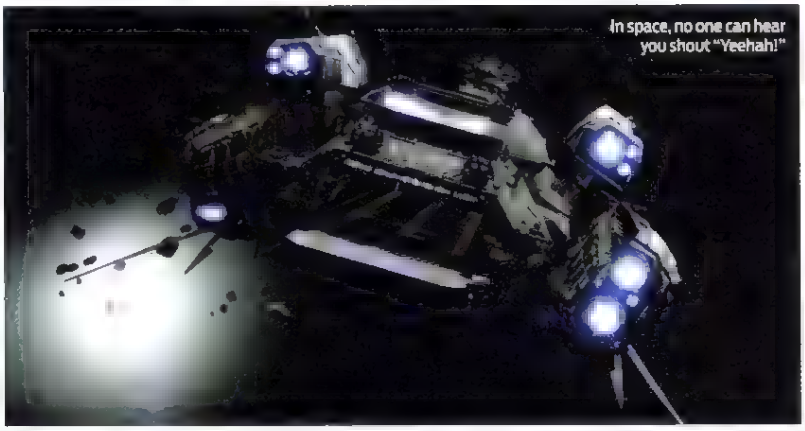


You can handle the controls in your ship, but they're grounded at the moment.

Whether you see yourself as an explorer or a pirate, you'll find your path in *Star Citizen*.



In space, no one can hear you shout "Yeehah!"

It's dangerous to deal in fantasy. The idea of an experience rarely integrates well with the reality of it—but Roberts is confident in the model. He won't sell everything that's asked for, but when people were buying multiple pledge tiers to get more ships, he "pivoted pretty quickly" to give them the opportunity. Star Citizen's pledge page now looks more like a store than a crowdfunding campaign, with slick design and not much acknowledgement of risk.

The ships that some 300,000 backers have bought aren't all the sexiest-looking sci-fi machines. They aren't impossibly sleek or covered with nonsense spires and antennae explained by technobabble, because they're being designed—within reason—as if they were actual, working ships, with considerations such as "the ergonomics of the cockpit" and "how a door or canopy cantilevers out."

In the Hangar Module—the first of many incremental releases—you can admire this engineering in a barebones version of the game. Optimization is "busy work" to be handled later, says Roberts, and on a just slightly aged system I could only manage 15fps. Roberts himself has twin GTX Titans in his rig, although he says one is more than enough, and level-of-detail optimization should make a big difference when it's implemented.

But first, the Dogfighting Module will outfit the hangar with a holodeck-like matchmaking system that will teleport players into a space combat simulation. I can't wait to fly (if I can muster the framerate, but there's been a slight delay. Roberts originally planned to release dogfighting in 2013 with the basic CryEngine netcode, but then decided it would be wiser to first build the framework for the persistent universe, the backbone that will eventually merge the work of all five studios into one game.

Later in 2014, the Planetside Module will release players from their metal holds to explore and trade. Then comes the first-person combat, the single-player campaign, and all the other Star Citizen dreams. When all the modules come together, Star Citizen will be the massive, persistent space sim of the original pitch.

The plan remains to have an alpha version of the whole thing ready by the end of 2014, and by the middle of 2015, Roberts thinks Star Citizen will be ready for the public. If the dreams of all those anxious ship owners come true, it will only be the beginning.

Tyler Wilde

RELEASE

THE WITCHER 3 WILD HUNT

World-shaping decisions underline this *Skyrim* challenger

Go open-world or get out. That seems to be the growing mentality of big game development, even when it's an illogical direction for the project in question to take.

Then there are projects like *The Witcher*, for which going open-world could be a welcome change—given that the series is already renowned for narrative choices that go deeper than the traditional remit of deciding who to shag and who to abandon to their fate.

The Witcher 3 boasts consequences that shape entire regions, from affecting local fishing economies to determining who ends up on the throne. *The Witcher 2* proved it could produce such scenarios with appropriately engaging consequences. In an open world of *Skyrim*-troubling size, this is something a lot more challenging for a mid-sized studio like CD Projekt Red to pull together, although the challenge of doing so has evidently brought the team to the height of its creative energies.

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In a sense, CD Projekt Red and BioWare (with *Dragon Age: Inquisition*) are both chasing the same goal in depicting their respective fictional universes in a more fully-formed and coherent way, instead of condensing their detailed mythologies into isolated areas as they previously did. Both *The Witcher 3* and *Dragon Age: Inquisition* are aiming high with the way you leave your mark on the environment. But the Polish developer's game boasts certain idiosyncrasies in storytelling and environmental design that set it apart from its high fantasy contemporaries.

> **"It's a convincingly bleak world—a good match for the darker premise of the story."**

The world of *Wild Hunt* is divided into distinct regions, inspired variously by folklore and history. We've talked about this more specifically previously, but the impression I got during the hands-off demo I saw last year is that *The Witcher 3* is veering even closer to the idea of a more realistic fantasy world. The art direction leans more towards medieval than fantastical, and I think the atmosphere benefits from doing so.

This is a convincingly bleak world, conveyed appropriately by the washed-out color palette and depressed-looking centers of population. As such, it's a good match for the darker premise of the story. An already war-ravaged humanity has underestimated the threat posed by the titular Wild Hunt, a mean bunch of ungodly warriors who sound a little White Walker-ish. In the midst of this is Geralt, who has a personal connection to the conflict at hand.

As the world itself has been the subject of a rethink, so has the way you interact with it. Geralt can now travel by boat and horse, and the combat system has been completely reinterpreted as a more organic, action-based system. The presence

> "CD Projekt Red has set itself enormous goals for a mid-sized studio."

of Geralt's *Batman: Arkham Asylum*-esque "Witcher sense" backs this up: such a design choice is there to make players learn the behavior of their foes, so that they're more able to slay them the next each time.

Don't see this as CD Projekt Red's attempt to pander to the console audience, however. It's still rooted in the series' fundamental combat mechanics, but it's an area that most players would agree could stand to be refined. Geralt can still switch between three stances for different kinds of encounter. The fast paced way the battles are animated is clearly a step closer to action-based design (or a "dedicated fighting game," as the developer puts it), but it's as much a stylistic change as a mechanical one.

This is Geralt's final story, although it's not going to be the last *Witcher* game. Across the series, we've seen CD Projekt Red progress in ambition from rough first effort, to overreaching but ultimately successful follow-up, to this, the developer's rousing attempt to compete in the biggest leagues of roleplaying. It's not quite an underdog story, but such progression is certainly impressive when its closest competitors have been doing this stuff a lot longer.

Why do only burly men drink in videogame taverns?

There's a tonal uniqueness to CD Projekt Red's games that I think is worth treasuring, and that also encompasses the roughness in dialogue and scriptwriting that I don't expect *The Witcher 3* to entirely circumnavigate. CD Projekt Red has set itself enormous goals for a mid-sized studio, and the art of open-world design in particular requires an entirely different set of disciplines than the smaller scale of previous *Witchers*. But there's a sense that CD Projekt Red wants to be roleplaying pioneers, that the chance to fight on all fronts is well worth taking, and that there's an obvious opportunity here to illustrate how decision-making in videogames should really be done.

Samuel Roberts

Don't be fooled by the lumbering mechs—this game plays fast.

TITANFALL

WHAT WE KNOW What does *Call of Duty* feel like when every player has a jetpack?

Considering it's just a few months away, it's a little frustrating that EA has only released a few, tightly-choreographed videos to tell us what *Titanfall* is and how it'll work.

Heavily scripted, these perfect, heroic, deathless multiplayer runs express the basic features: jump packs, clambering, and the titan mechs that each player can call into battle. What they convey best is that *Titanfall*'s defining aspect isn't its titular robo-suits at all, but the perpetual state of motion its battles seem to be in.

This isn't a shooter where you'll hold Shift to silence your footsteps or lie prone in a corner for half the match, dialed into a scope. If you aren't sprinting in *Titanfall*, you're probably shooting. There's a sense of urgency, of a voice in your ear that, like in *Call of Duty* multiplayer, seems to be urging you forward "Hurry! Go! Attack!"

Some good skills are drawn upon: reflexes, physical awareness, target prioritization. *Titanfall* is an acrobatic, athletic triple-A FPS, and we should all take a moment to celebrate what a rare thing that is in 2014. The jetpack essentially makes every player into the Scout from *Team Fortress 2*, but with the added tool of wall-running. The entire end phase of each match is a sprint – a mad, hot pursuit where the losing team races to a dropship extraction as the winners hunt them down for bonus XP. The losers' dropship isn't a safe zone, either: it can be blown to pieces if titans or infantry pour in enough damage.

> **"*Titanfall* is an acrobatic, athletic triple-A FPS, and we should celebrate that."**

Even death begets movement when you're in a titan: if you're critically damaged, you can jab E to eject straight out of the skull of your mech, hovering for a few vulnerable seconds in the air before landing. It's a lovely feature that not only keeps you in the match, but turns titan pilots into clay pigeons, prompting those on the ground to make a skill shot.

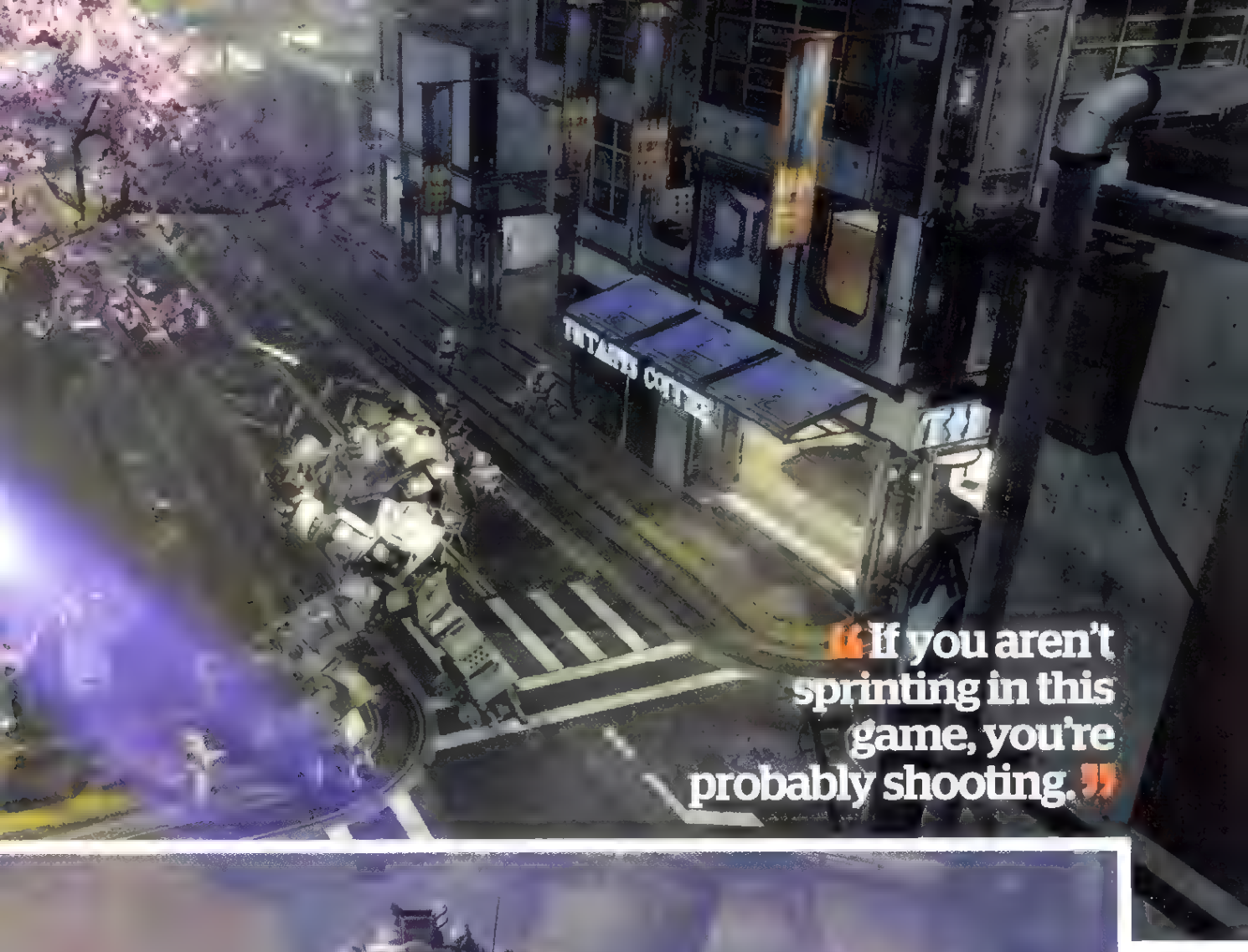
Short of *Tribes: Ascend* (R.I.P.) enjoying a resurgence in popularity, *Titanfall* is the most movement-driven FPS we'll have next year, and it's nice to think that Respawn's direction on the game could influence fellow blockbuster shooters to make twitch skills and speed a larger element of their design.

One worrying detail is that the game may not allow genuine, player-owned servers. Instead, it'll utilize the Xbox Live Cloud for multiplayer hosting. The small benefit of this service is that, in theory, an infinite number of servers can be created to accommodate demand. But where those servers physically exist, and what specific settings they'll be running, may not be things that players can control. I love *Titanfall*'s evolution of *CoD*-style combat, but Infinity Ward's mixed history of dedicated server support has me concerned about this key aspect of Respawn's multiplayer-only game. ■

Evan Lahti

DEVELOPER Respawn Entertainment
PUBLISHER EA
LINK www.titanfall.com

RELEASE



"If you aren't sprinting in this game, you're probably shooting."

The fight may look uneven, but he's got a jetpack.

HEARTHSTONE

NEW INFO Blizzard's explosively popular card battler will only get bigger

Hearthstone has a big year ahead of it. The game's "closed" beta is stretching the definition of the term, and its popularity on Twitch and YouTube suggests that the game is only going to grow from here. It has become Blizzard's most hotly anticipated game, which is more than anyone expected from a side project produced by a team of just 15 people.

That said, I'm starting to suspect that the game will go through a rough patch when it is opened up to the public. I went through a period of really disliking it—I wrote about that a few months ago—and I've seen the same comments pop up over and over again. Complaints about balance are common, often pinned onto rare cards that require a huge investment of time or real money to acquire. Then there are the classes that simply feel unfair to play against, or the Arena—a premium mode where you assemble a new deck from random cards—that can feel like gambling.

The key word here is "feel." As I stuck with *Hearthstone* I started to enjoy it more I figured out what were balance issues and what were things I simply wasn't very good at yet, improved my knowledge of the game, and started to have more fun (and even win, from time to time).

It turns out that this is how Blizzard sees it too. "There are two ways to balance the game," says production director Jason Chayes. "One is looking at the raw analytical data—which cards are dominating, which are weaker than we'd like them to be. The other part of that is how it *feels*. We might have a card that isn't particularly dominant, but it feels bad to play against—that's not good either."

A recent example of this was the Priest's Mind Control card, which allows a player to permanently steal an enemy minion. There are counters to it, and it didn't feature much in high-end play, but that feeling of being stung for playing a minion you'd been waiting all game to deploy made it a common cause for complaint among the game's community. It had its mana cost increased not simply for mathematical balance reasons, then, but to change the context in which players see it — to make it *feel* fairer.

It's going to be interesting to follow the game as it negotiates the next couple of months. Blizzard wants *Hearthstone* to be the biggest digital CCG in the world, and plans are underway to build a structured eSport around it. First, though, the developer needs to figure out a way to help players negotiate the frustration that can follow the honeymoon period.

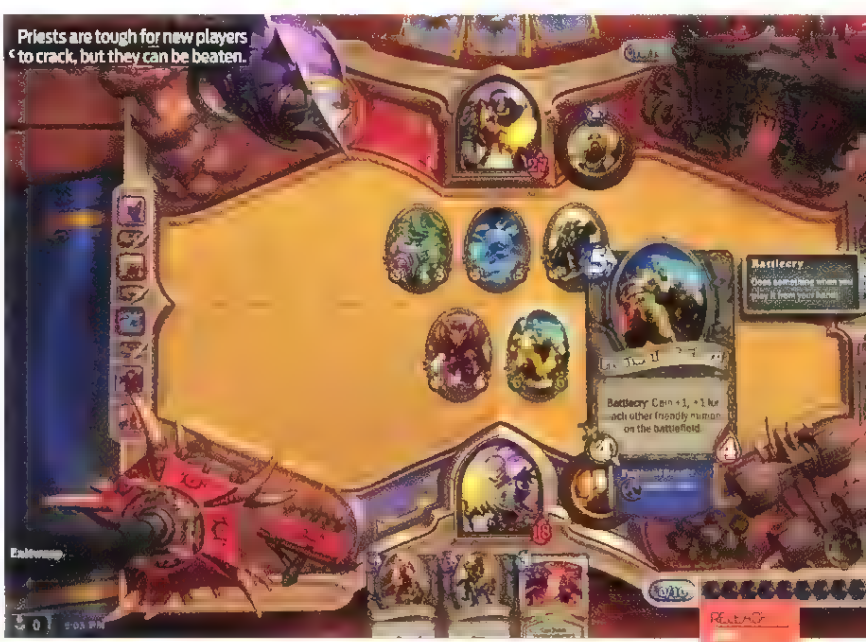
> **"Its popularity on Twitch and YouTube suggests that the game is only going to grow."**

Part of that solution, I suspect, will be found in how players interact with each other outside of the game. *Hearthstone*'s in-game chat is currently limited to emotes—Blizzard wants to maintain the spirit of that feature, but also allow players to send friend requests to opponents after a game. Likewise, expansions to in-game stat tracking and the official website will make it easier for newcomers to see how other players are performing and hopefully gain the same sense of context that helped me get past my own period of disillusionment.

Either way, this is going to be *Hearthstone*'s year. It's up to Blizzard to determine what *kind* of year that is. ■

Chris Thursten

DEVELOPER Blizzard
PUBLISHER Blizzard
LINK www.battle.net


Priests are tough for new players to crack, but they can be beaten.
Battlecry
Battlecry: Gain +1 Attack for each other friendly minion on the battlefield.

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STARBOUND

Taking 2D sandboxing to the furthest corners of the universe

All things considered, Cute-Eater the Randomly Generated Floran is surprisingly twee. Her lilac-petaled head and emo skaterpunk outfit are more adolescent than carnivorous plant alien, her gunslinger pose more evocative of a kid playing pretend. I've been trying not to get attached to my characters in this side-scrolling sandbox, but my bow-wielding, flesh-eating tulip is making it so very hard.

Every playthrough in *Starbound* begins the same way: on a fuel-starved ship, with a quest to locate a space-age, matter-manipulating horseshoe. Once armed with a way to manipulate the environment, you're directed planetside. And this is where *Starbound*'s luster turns positively incandescent. Each world you visit is often weirdly, wonderfully unique. In my first playthrough, I found myself on a planet boiling over with acid and giant cacti. My second? A planet populated by deadly solar flares and trees with eyeballs hanging from every branch.

READ ME
DEVELOPER Chucklefish
PUBLISHER Chucklefish
LINK www.playstarbound.com

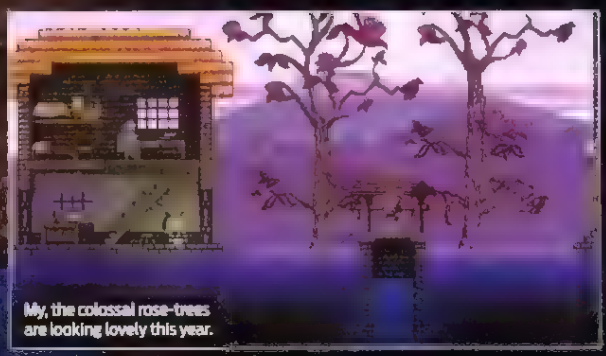
Like the plant life, the ambulatory members of an ecosystem can vary wildly from world to world. On one planet, snub-nosed hummingbirds and ice beasts might prosper while an extraterrestrial *Jurassic Park* may rule another. Their differences aren't merely epidermal, either: abilities and temperaments are similarly disparate, making every new encounter a reason to fall back and squint with the utmost suspicion. In all the time I've spent in *Starbound*, I've only seen one world that could be construed as remotely benign and that's Cute-Eater's current port of call. It's a massive rose garden where long, frigid nights are common but slithery, tongue-pink lizards are not. Even here, threats abound. Lightning-slinging toucans are only funny until they kill you.

> **"Threats abound: lightning-slinging toucans are only funny until they kill you."**

The sense of genetic diversity doesn't stop with the local fauna and flora. The races are ruled by a rainbow of eccentricities. The Floran are a ravenous breed of unassuming, carnivorous plant people who prefer burning eyeballs and offal to tropical punch and burgers. The Glitch are robots trapped in an eternal Renaissance Fair. It's a wild universe out there, and *Starbound* takes every opportunity it can to remind you of that.

For all the wackiness it presents, *Starbound* plays it safe in terms of actual function. Much like its predecessors in this genre, it makes survival your ultimate goal. While there are new objectives to work toward, the first order of business invariably revolves around accruing food and lumber, and building a shelter against night terrors. What follows once you've established a base of operations is up to you. Like any good sandbox, *Starbound* gives you the liberty to do anything, from blitzing through the main quest to pillaging high-tech temples or building an

> "Will they mind that you've stolen all the schematics and a brain in a jar?"


My, the colossal rose-trees are looking lovely this year.

The old adage "Eyeballs don't grown on trees," finally proven wrong.

agricultural empire in the bowels of a winter wasteland.

Happily, the control scheme is simplistic enough to ensure that you won't be derailed from your explorations by the need to memorize and execute intricate combos. You move with the WASD keys, jump with the spacebar, and use most items with the left mouse button. (Dual-wielding with the right mouse button is also possible.) Blocks are positioned with either mouse button: right-click to place them in the backdrop, left-click to set them in the foreground. I suspect it eventually gets a little more complicated than that, but I'm still too busy exploring my current solar system to find out.

If there's anything *Starbound* is stellar at, it's maintaining that peculiar mix of wonder and dread that accompanies your first foray into a game like this. Each new procedurally generated planet is a cause for excitement. Will this one contain a Glitch settlement? Are there bandits on the moon you just landed on? Who or what left these futuristic laboratories all over your homeworld and will they mind that you've stolen all the schematics and a brain in a jar? While the NPCs I've met are generally brusque, one-dimensional characters with very little to say, it seems Chucklefish has more planned—and I can't wait.

Primate propaganda? Check. Interrogation table? Double check. Bed time!

For now, I'm happy harvesting other planets for resources to enhance Cute-Eater's homeworld. What began as a handful of wheat seeds is now a sprawling field of gold. The makeshift shack Cute-Eater began with is being remodeled; dirt and wooden planks replaced by glass and stone. There's a third floor with a balcony overlooking my plantation. I mainly use it to snipe at the crawling monstrosities that visit in the evenings. I also stole some books for the underground study. It's rad. You see, there may be plenty of planets like it, but this one, with its bounty of gargantuan roses and placid Cthulhoid bipeds, is mine. ■

Cassandra Khaw

DRAGON AGE INQUISITION

BioWare lets you build up your world in its latest fantasy RPG

In some ways, the third *Dragon Age* game's subtitle could have been "Intervention" instead of "Inquisition." After the epic start in *Origins*, a game that felt like it came from *Baldur's Gate 2*-era BioWare, many players found that *Dragon Age II*'s limited scope, hands-off approach to party members, and constrained geographical setting made for a disappointing sequel. Those criticisms have been taken to heart: instead of imposing limits, BioWare wants to open the doors on the world it has created.

"*Inquisition* is absolutely an open-world game," says executive producer Mark Darrah. "The narrative center is surrounded by vast areas that allow you to explore and set your own goals."

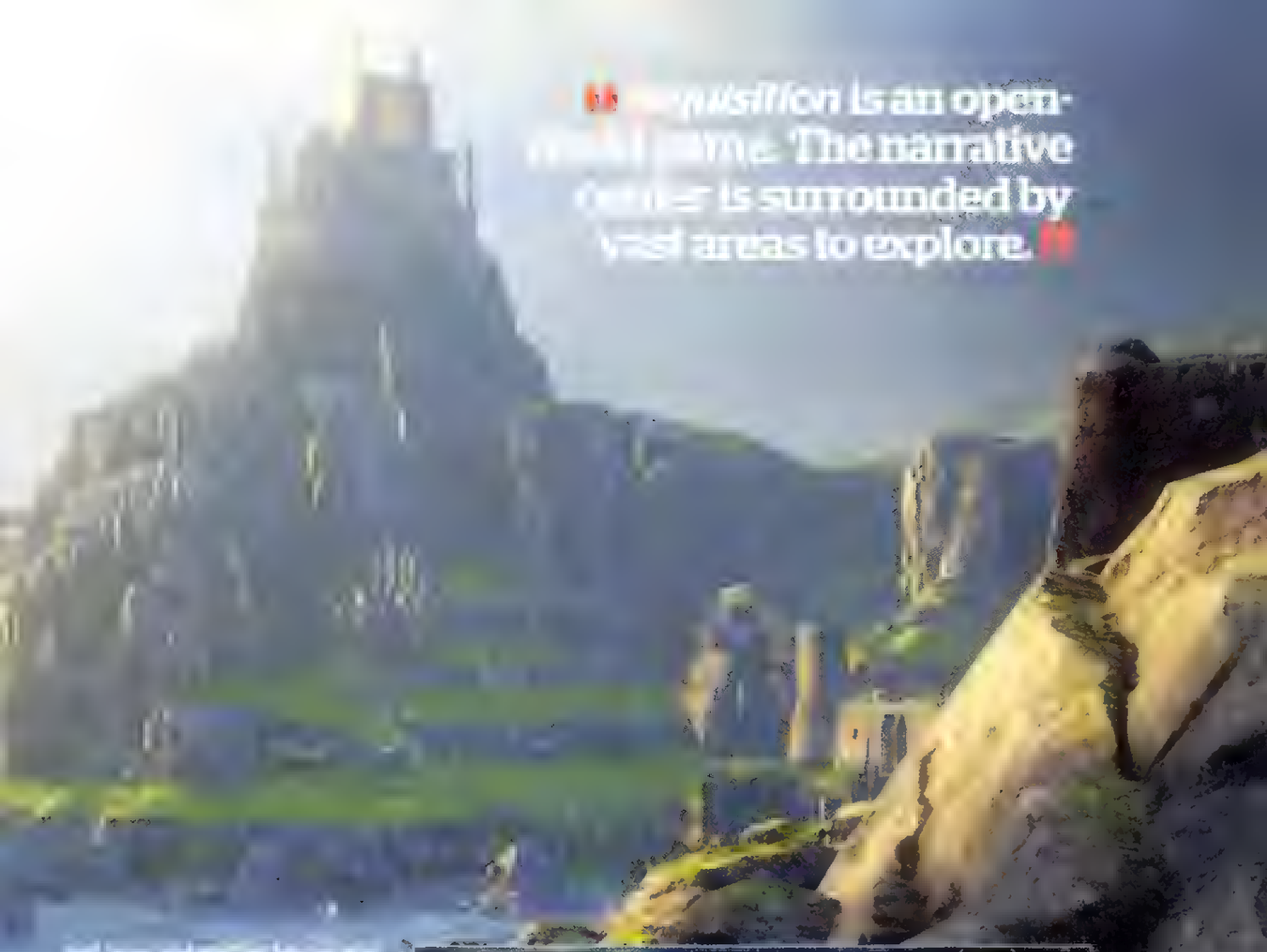
The emphasis on vast areas is important—*Dragon Age II* only let you adventure in the surrounding areas of the remote Kirkwall, often reusing environments for what typically felt like modest side quests. *Inquisition*, in contrast, will put players into more areas than ever before, providing open-world zones not just for the Ferelden from *Origins*, but also Orlais, Nevarra, and the Free Marches. Each area will have its own feel, and will include multiple environments both above and below ground—even crossing over to other dimensions. If the Fade returns, though, let's hope it's less green. And boring.

The new territories are important not just because BioWare has been teasing its wider world since *Origins*, but also because controlling these areas will grant more power for your new faction. Much like the Gray Wardens, the Templars or the Mage's Guild, the Inquisition is another group vying for power after The Veil is torn apart, leaving magic and reality to collide. Rather than just gathering a ragtag group of heroes as in previous games, though, you're tasked with building up and strengthening the Inquisition by capturing outposts from rival organizations.

"You can choose to spread your power by capturing and customizing fortresses and keeps while exploring the open world," says producer Cameron Lee. "By doing so, you'll be able to recruit more soldiers and agents, which in turn allows you to decide how to change the area around that keep." It sounds more strategic, and certainly more complicated than past games, but BioWare says that the territory-claiming elements ultimately serve to help players leave their mark on Thedas.

It's also notable that BioWare is looking further afield than the RPG to find inspiration; *Dragon Age III* draws just as heavily from open-world sandbox games. Having a lot of room to explore is all well and

READ ME
DEVELOPER BioWare
PUBLISHER EA
LINK www.dragonage.com



"*Inquisition* is an open-[illegible] game. The narrative [illegible] is surrounded by vast areas to explore."

Meddling with magic never ends well, does it?

[illegible]ch of th[illegible] natural f[illegible] other activities.

Darrah mentions another change that many will welcome. "Yes, you can equip armor on your followers." Moving away from the simplified inventory system of the last game, full inventory management for both armor and weapons returns. *Inquisition*'s crafting system is also bigger than in previous games, expanding past runes and potions into full weapon and armor making. Lee says there are already hundreds of thousands of different weapons and armor items that players can create.

The tactical camera from *Origins* also returns as an optional element that players can turn on or off, and Lee promises that it will give even more information to directly control your party, assess the battlefield, and plan how to overcome challenges. It may be the most welcome change: at its best, *Origins* plays like a tactical MMO where you're in control, and I'm eager to see deep combat make a return.

In order to give the player more freedom while retaining the character-specific costumes that gave *Dragon Age II*'s companions a sense of identity, the same armor piece will vary in appearance when equipped on different characters. A qunari's take on platemail will necessarily be different to that of a human, elf, or dwarf, and this will be achieved without limiting your ability to tool your party for battle in your own way.

To pull all of these ambitious changes off, BioWare is building *Inquisition* on the Frostbite engine, the same technology that enabled massive destruction in DICE's *Battlefield 4*. Darrah says the engine lets BioWare build areas many times the size of anything it has tackled before, as well as create caves with seamless transitions, beautiful lighting and visual effects, and—obviously—wanton destruction. But he also teases that players won't just break things: "Frostbite allows us to do construction as well," he says.

Here's hoping that the final way I can put my personal stamp on Thedas is to build a temple to my glory. ■

Cory Banks

TOM CLANCY'S THE DIVISION

New tech in the spotlight as Ubisoft's mysterious online shooter

New York City is sick. Bags of rubbish litter alleyways and pile up [illegible] up various clog the [illegible]

Actually, it looks [illegible] New York City—even Crytek's [illegible] decaying New York [illegible] jammed with detail and detritus, grimy reflections as the New York of Ubisoft Massive's "true next-gen" Snowdrop engine. If we take Ubisoft's word and tech demo trailers for it, Snowdrop renders the kind of dynamic worlds we've been waiting for as the consoles took their time catching up to PC hardware. Surfaces dent realistically from bullet hits and light shafts dynamically poke through the holes. Plumes of volumetric steam leak from manholes, radiating red light as abandoned cars flash their hazard lights. Clean, fresh, snow melts into slush.

This hellscape is the result of a viral outbreak. Three weeks after patient zero, society has fallen apart, but it isn't beyond saving. "There's still hope," Head of Communications Martin Hultberg tells us, and the natural survival tools are, of course, guns and gadgets. It wouldn't be worthy of the late Tom Clancy's name without near-future military tech and tactics.

Outside of that, *The Division* is rather unlike both Ubisoft and Massive's established games. It isn't an MMO, for sure, but its concepts are unmistakably the stuff of MMOs. It's an online RPG shooter [illegible], PvP, [illegible] will bring [illegible] combat— [illegible] store or [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]

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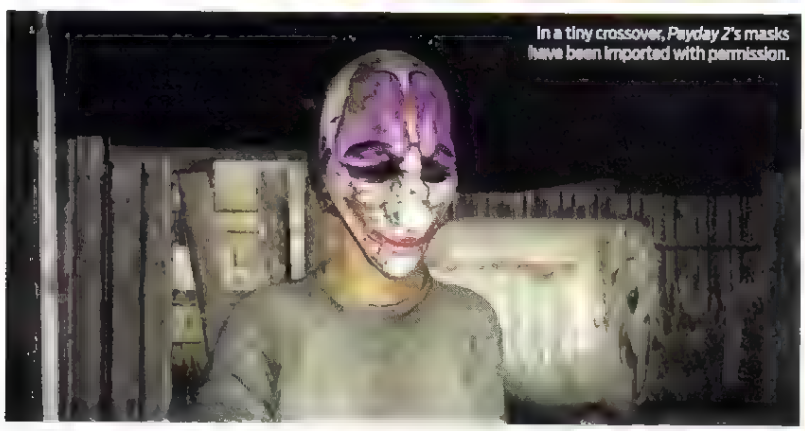
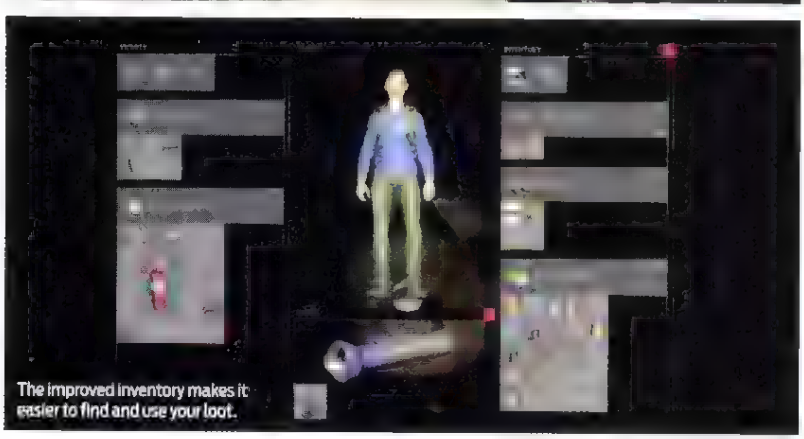
The HUD has gone, and with it the indicators of how visible and hearable you are.

You can now customize your appearance with found items.



In a tiny crossover, *Payday 2*'s masks have been imported with permission.



The improved inventory makes it easier to find and use your loot.

DAYZ

PLAY IT The zombie sim has returned, and it's changing shape

It's fascinating how a new item can change the nature of a sandbox game like *DayZ*. The standalone version, currently in alpha following its sudden release on December 16 after a long hibernation period, added handcuffs as a tool. On the surface, cuffs contribute a simple game mechanic: if a survivor is standing still, you can bind their hands, preventing them from using items that might hurt you. A handcuff key will free them. Zip ties and rope will eventually be added, too, with different durability and escapability than the metal bracelets.

But handcuffs aren't simply another piece of loot to be collected and passed around the game's disheveled facsimile of the Czech Republic. In *DayZ* they're a verb, and not even the game's creators know how players will use handcuffs to express themselves.

They're a helpful robbery tool, but beyond that they present malicious possibilities limited only by the collective imagination of the *DayZ* playerbase. Handcuffs could make

DEVELOPER
Dean Hall

PUBLISHER
Bohemia Interactive

LINK
www.dayzmod.com

"It's encouraging that simple additions such as handcuffs spark a chain of creative, and absurd, scenarios."

kidnapping more mainstream than it was in the *DayZ* mod. Rival gangs could use them to perform prisoner exchanges, or a new form of human trafficking. Or perhaps, on the other side of the law, a clan of rangers will establish themselves as a post-apocalyptic police force, using non-lethal weapons to disable, arrest, and imprison bandits. Could zombies eventually be handcuffable, and then pacified or domesticated?

It's encouraging that simple additions like this spark a chain of creative and absurd scenarios. In addition to more stabilization improvements and a whole set of necessary fixes, new verbs like handcuffing are exactly what *DayZ* needs. The mod version of the game often devolved into a shoot-on-sight deathmatch. Bohemia, of course, in its hands-off approach to creating unscripted games such as *Arma*, has not designed this out of *DayZ*. Instead the studio aims to alleviate *DayZ*'s reputation as a shooter that happens to be set in a massive sandbox by making the game's social and non-combat interactions more interesting.

Especially helpful to this are that crafting, eating, and cooking have become fleshed-out features of the new *DayZ*. A redesigned inventory screen finally makes item management and manipulation easy, and the multiple steps that it takes to put a battery in a flashlight, or butane into a lantern, makes loot seem more tangible role. On day one, I spent two hours in downtown Elektrozavodsk and Chernogorsk and, miraculously, I wasn't attacked. Every survivor I came across either warned me about other threats, tagged along with me, or politely jogged away. Caveat: I would definitely have been hideously murdered at one point if I was wearing different clothes (see page 81).

It also makes simplicities such as cooking or boiling questionable water feel a little more like actual rituals than just pantomimed abstractions. And I love, as mundane as it sounds, that characters physically have to equip a compass when using it. It places an interesting cost on getting your bearings, because you lose the use of your hands—it's another way you'll be able to distinguish explorers from untrustworthy psychopaths.

My experience so far in *DayZ* has only reinforced that combat could play a smaller

"The multiple steps it takes to put a battery into a torch makes loot seem more tangible."

In those simple, needle-in-an-undead-haystack intersections with other players, you realize that *DayZ* is one of the few games where rumors and information can circulate organically by word of mouth. Although an array of radios are likely to be added in 2014 (I'm still hopeful that Bohemia will deliver on its promise of a one-way baby monitor, which could be used for all kinds of mischief), for the moment *Arma*'s adopted, proximity voice chat is the only way to communicate with other players—other than a few charming emotes like flipping the bird. Assuming that you're not sifting through wikis, hopping into *DayZ* in this early period means you actually have to initiate conversations with other players to learn how systems such as blood types, disease, and water purification work. The downside to that opaque approach to instruction is that *DayZ* remains unforgiving. A hundreds-of-hours veteran like me had to look up how to point his flashlight forward, for God's sake. (It's spacebar, by the way.)

Bohemia doesn't make light of the fact that there's considerable work still to be done. On the day of release, its candid creator Dean Hall said on Twitter: "Please do not just buy the game because you heard it was cool." As you boot the game, a message warns that you'll "experience bugs, unfinished features, and many more things that disrupt your game experience."

Even in its skeleton state, you can taste the excitement around the possibilities that *DayZ*'s approach to freedom, interrelated game systems, and survival storytelling offers. In just two days, 200,000 players had swarmed the servers.

RELEASE

Evan Lahti

Medics use the game's most advanced tech.

WILDSTAR

Carbine is making an MMO that puts fun first

Wildstar knows it's an MMO. That'll put some people off, I imagine almost 10 years after the release of WoW, the genre has attracted a chorus of detractors who feel that its hour has been and gone.

That doesn't feel deserved in this case. Wildstar is bright, cheerful, and gamey—a Saturday morning cartoon writ large that promises to occupy a great many Saturday mornings with a constant stream of quests to hand in, challenges to complete, areas to explore, bases to build, guilds to battle, and so on. It breezily ignores the notion that MMOs have a mandate to change the world—and even as someone who used to cling to that idea, I can appreciate the game's confident acceptance of the fact that it's entertainment. It's OK to be entertained, sometimes.

AD ME

DEVELOPER
Carbine Studios

PUBLISHER
NCsoft

LINK
www.wildstar-online.com

Combat relies heavily on positioning and twitch skill, reminding me more of League of Legends or Dota than World of Warcraft despite sharing the latter's action bar, and many of its designers. The recently announced Medic class paints 'areas of healing, damage, and debuff onto the battlefield, while assigning drones to apply further effects to specific targets. These AoEs are represented by huge colored squares and cones that keep players' eyes on the action, rather than on their cooldowns.

> **"Carbine's art direction has resulted in some beautiful sci-fi landscapes."**

Defeated monsters explode in a shower of chunky coins and crates of loot that are vacuumed up into the inventory with a single button press. Kill enough enemies and you trigger a timed challenge to defeat more; beat that and you get an additional reward from a roulette wheel of options. In the nine months since I first played the game, these systems have started to cohere into an experience that combines the compulsiveness of a mobile game with the long-term draw of a persistent world.

What gives the game hardcore credibility is how skill based it ultimately is. During a preview event I duelled former PC Gamer editor Graham Smith playing an identical Spellslinger character. I defeated him utterly, demonstrating that (a) I have played a lot of Dota, (b) Wildstar has serious PvP chops, and (c) I am a better person than Graham.

There's also the world itself. Carbine's excellent art direction has resulted in some beautiful sci-fi landscapes: icy wastes criss crossed with ancient energy lines, fractured badlands where gravity is inconsistent, and glowing crystals hang in the air. Top caliber execution deserves to win the game a dedicated audience, and I'm hopeful that it'll find one—the MMO needs another solid, well built game that doesn't lean on its famous license to find fans. Wildstar risks slipping under the radar, but don't let it—it might just remind you why you liked MMOs in the first place. ■

RELEASE

Chris Thursten

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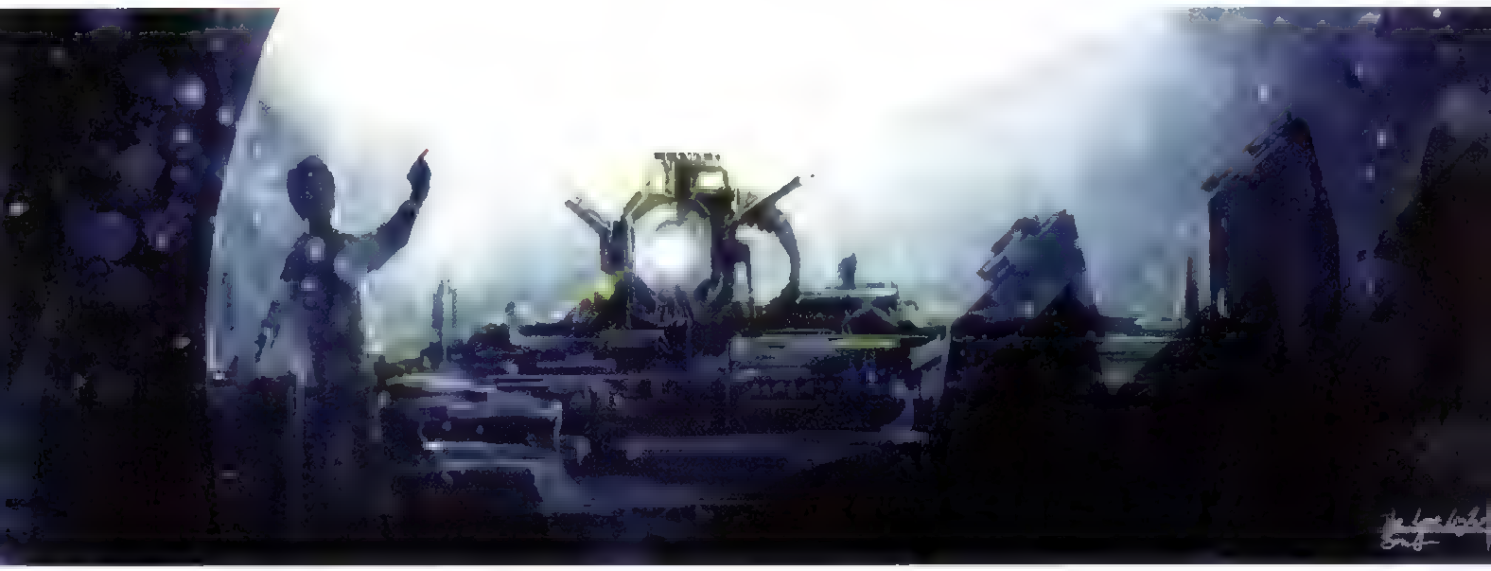

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PILLARS OF ETERNITY

How a nostalgic RPG hopes to be an engine of infinite choice

Josh Sawyer, project director of *Pillars of Eternity*, is talking about how the game has progressed in the year since its Kickstarter campaign. "When I walk around the office and I see people playing, unless you get up close it looks like they're playing an old Infinity Engine game. It has the look and I think the fundamental feeling that went into those games. So by that measure I think we're doing pretty well."

If you're making a crowdfunded game, you never have to be bashful about your nostalgic intentions. *Eternity* was funded on the strength of its isometric RPG heritage. Sawyer was lead designer on *Icewind Dale II*, and the development team contains people who previously worked on *Planescape: Torment*. Unlike those games though, the setting and systems are no longer tied to *Dungeons & Dragons*, allowing its creators to address some of the key frustrations of tabletop adaptations.

"Combat rounds can be very limiting," Sawyer says, referring to the way that the Infinity Engine handled fights through a series of six-second intervals. "We're doing something else, in the spirit of a fully real-time, continuous, purely time-based system." The aim is to make combat more engaging rather than having sprites ineffectually hacking away at each other, waiting for a dice roll to connect.

The "active pause" system lets you pause the game and issue orders that will be enacted once it is restarted.

Supporting this is a flexible class system. So whether you're a fighter, wizard, or monk, you'll be able to wear armor. The trade-off is that armor-wearing characters are slower to cast abilities, which isn't a problem for the lower-maintenance fighters but less desirable for the more micromanagement-heavy magic users. These balanced class mechanics open up more interesting party compositions, with followers being picked from either specific in-world characters or your own creations.

Obsidian isn't giving away much about the plot, only that your created character is caught in the middle of an "incident." This causes a series of consequences that build into your story. Vague, but it's a character arc designed to give the player options. "We want to let the player feel like they have a lot of control over where the story goes, who they help, who they punish, and what the ultimate resolutions of major story points are," says Sawyer.

Expect plenty of choice in how you deal with individual encounters, too. Sawyer uses the example of guards protecting a sacred dungeon you need to explore. "You can trick them, talk them out of it, or intimidate them," he says. "But the default is to just walk up to them and kill them." It's good to have options.

Phil Savage

READ ME
DEVELOPER Obsidian Entertainment
PUBLISHER Obsidian Entertainment
LINK www.bit.ly/ProjectEternity

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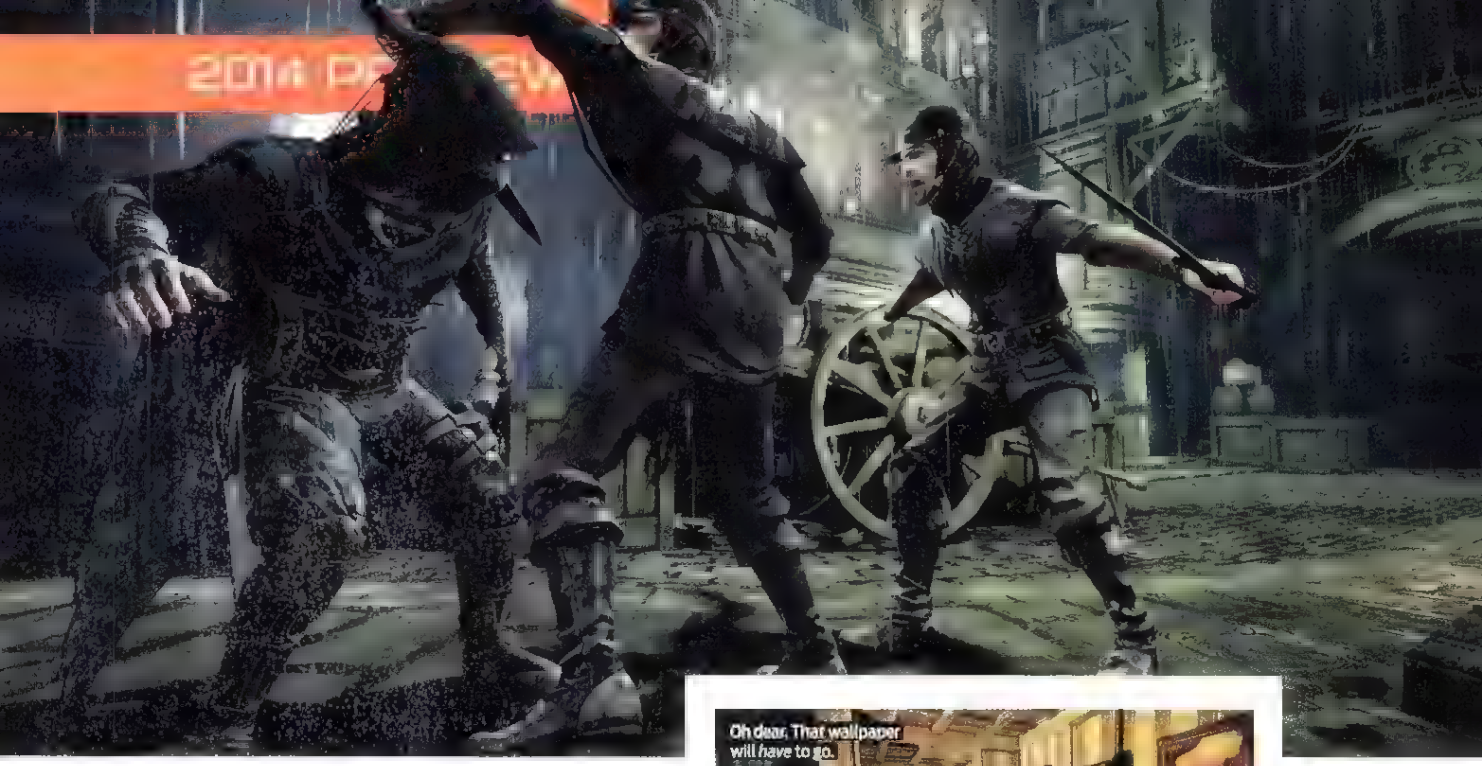


THIEF

Eidos Montreal is listening. *Thief* fans were understandably upset to find an arbitrary XP system in the game, which rewarded Garrett for headshots, but the dev has taken it out in response. "It was reducing our motivation to steal," explains game director Nic Cantin. "Rewarding killing like that was wrong for a master thief." The developer also revealed that quick-time events have been removed from its game. Even so, we're remaining cautious in our optimism about this reboot. The series hallmarks are all there—shadows, arrows, cobbled streets—but in a post-*Dishonored* world, it's struggling to stand out. Let's hope the team pulls *Thief* together for its planned February release. ■

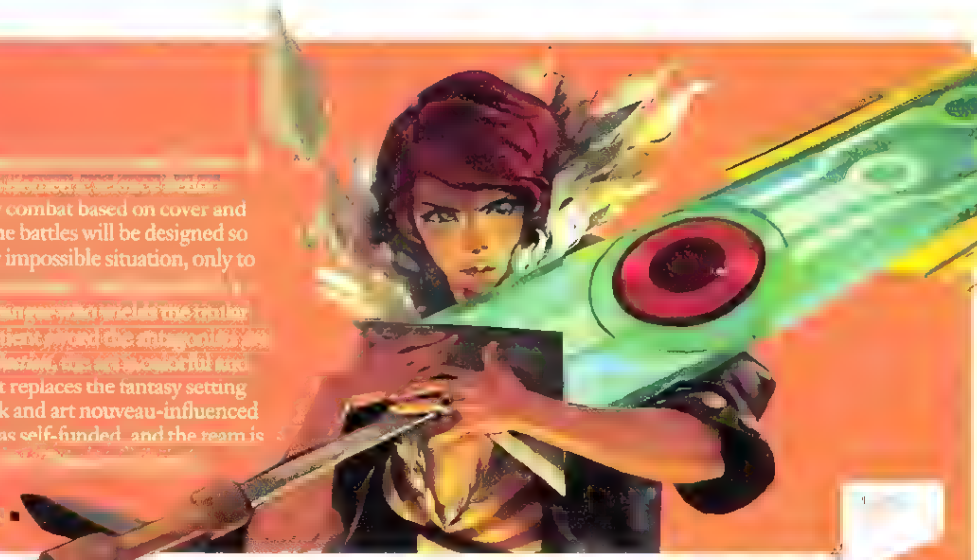
READ ME
DEVELOPER
Eidos Montreal
PUBLISHER
Square Enix
LINK
www.thiefgame.com

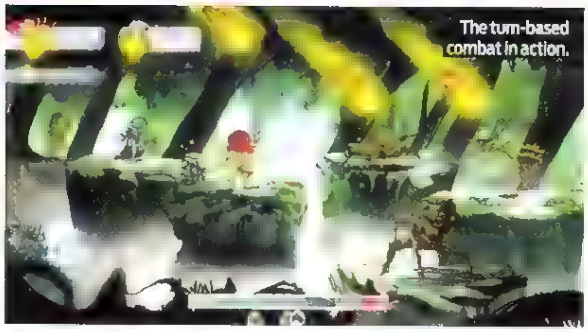
RELEASE

TRANSISTOR

Transistor pits exploration of [illegible] world with turn-based strategy combat based on cover and positioning. Supergiant Games says the battles will be designed so that you'll find yourself in a seemingly impossible situation, only to [illegible]

READ ME
Supergiant Games
[illegible]





CHILD OF LIGHT

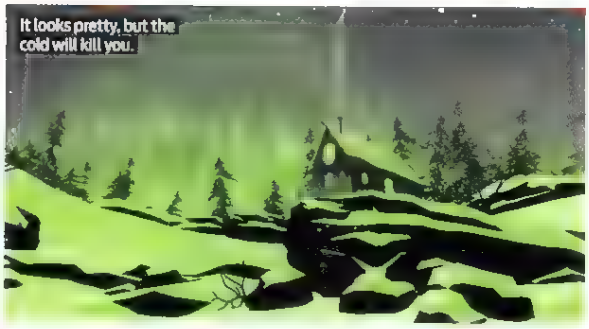
Powered by the UbiArt engine, which enables concept art to be inserted in a game and animated, this is a lavish fantasy RPG with beautiful hand-painted visuals. Many of its team previously worked on *Far Cry 3*, and hero Aurora progresses through a skill tree similar to Jason Brody's. The comparisons end there, though. This is the kind of game you'd expect to see from an indie studio, not a publishing giant. Influenced by the best Japanese RPGs, it has you exploring a lush fantasy world and engaging in tactical turn-based battles. "We want *Child of Light* to be like a playable poem," says creative director Patrick Plourde. "A love letter to art and videogames."

DEVELOPER
Ubisoft Montreal

PUBLISHER
Ubisoft

LINK
www.childoflight.tumblr.com

RELEASE



THE LONG DARK

Stranded in a snowy wilderness, pilot Will Mackenzie (voiced by Mark "Commander Shepard" Meer) struggles to survive in a world where an atmospheric phenomenon has rendered technology useless. The emphasis is on exploration and survival rather than action. You'll have to keep warm, fed, sheltered, and safe from predatory wildlife as the freezing nights close in. There are other survivors too, some of whom will be aggressive, so the game isn't completely free of conflict, but it's always a last resort. Interestingly, there's no HUD or *Minecraft*-style meters: Mackenzie will simply say what he needs, whether it's food or a fire. The stylized, minimalist visuals are particularly striking.

DEVELOPER
Hinterland Games

PUBLISHER
[illegible]

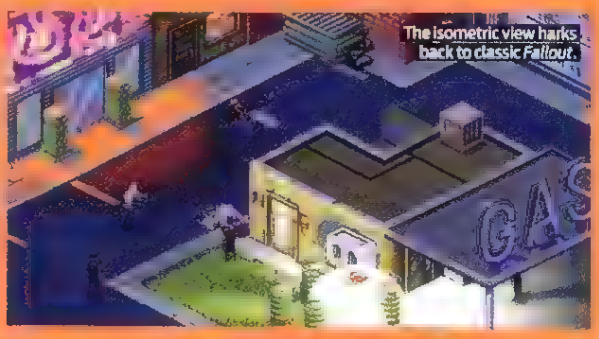
LINK
www.intothedarkgame.com

RELEASE

THE EVIL WITHIN

R

READ ME



CONFEDERATE EXPRESS

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READ ME

CLOCKWORK EMPIRES

This *Dwarf Fortress*-like, Victorian-flavored colony-settling sim also has a touch of Lovecraft to it. Leave your laboratories and scientists unattended and they'll start dabbling in forbidden magic, summoning unspeakable horrors. Exploration and scientific discovery are a big part of growing your colony, but in a world where such evil exists, it can be a dangerous pursuit. Your colony will have a distinct class system, with upper, middle, and lower class citizens needing different things, as well as artists, soldiers, and cultists. Buildings can be customized, giving the place a distinct personality, and... well, we could go on. We'll be covering this one a lot in future issues.

DEVELOPER Gaslamp Games
PUBLISHER In-house
LINK www.clockwork empires.com
RELEASE

PARADISE LOST
FIRST CONTACT

In *Paradise Lost* you play Subject W, a squid-like alien plant that escapes from a lab where it's being studied by probably evil scientists. The game fuses the reactive stealth of *Deus Ex* and the non-linear layout of the *Metroid* and *Castlevania* games. As you play, Subject W evolves its skills to suit your play style. To help you evade the lab's security, you can possess guards, lob organic bombs, create decoys, and clamber around on walls and ceilings. It's yet another game on these pages to use pixel art, and notable for its animation, which is remarkably detailed. As well as all this, there's a story to follow, puzzles to solve and platforming challenges around the facility.

DEVELOPER Ashtree Works
PUBLISHER In-house
LINK www.ashtreeworks.com
RELEASE

HYPER LIGHT DRIFTER

READ ME

ELITE: DANGEROUS

READ ME

The post-apocalyptic desert setting isn't as barren as you might expect.

MAD MAX

Just Cause creator Avalanche is tackling a game based on the Mad Max series, taking advantage of the developer's knack for open worlds and flamboyant stunts. Playing as Max, now with an Australian accent after the American accented trailer caused an uproar among fans, you roam the wasteland for parts to beef up your car, battling bandits and exploring fortified shanty towns. Is this the Australian outback? The dev is being all mysterious, but wherever you are it's certainly a far cry from the glorious vistas, cascading waterfalls, and lush jungles of Panau Island. For all that, what we've seen so far looks like classic Avalanche: lots of explosions and hanging from treacherously moving vehicles. ■

READ ME

DEVELOPER
Avalanche Studios

PUBLISHER
Warner Bros

LINK
www.madmax-game.com

As in the films, vehicle combat plays a major role.

Max introduces his knee to a bandit's face.

RELEASE

DARK SOULS II

After the dynamic pace of the original, From Software has promised to do a much better job with the PC version of its sequel. Original director Hidetaka Miyazaki lists key changes. Enemies drop health-restoring orbs and key NPCs can no longer be killed. Fans faithful to the series' punishing reduce your maximum health, but at its core, that incredible combat system is still intact, but with smoother transitions between animations. Let's just hope it come through with its PC promises. ■

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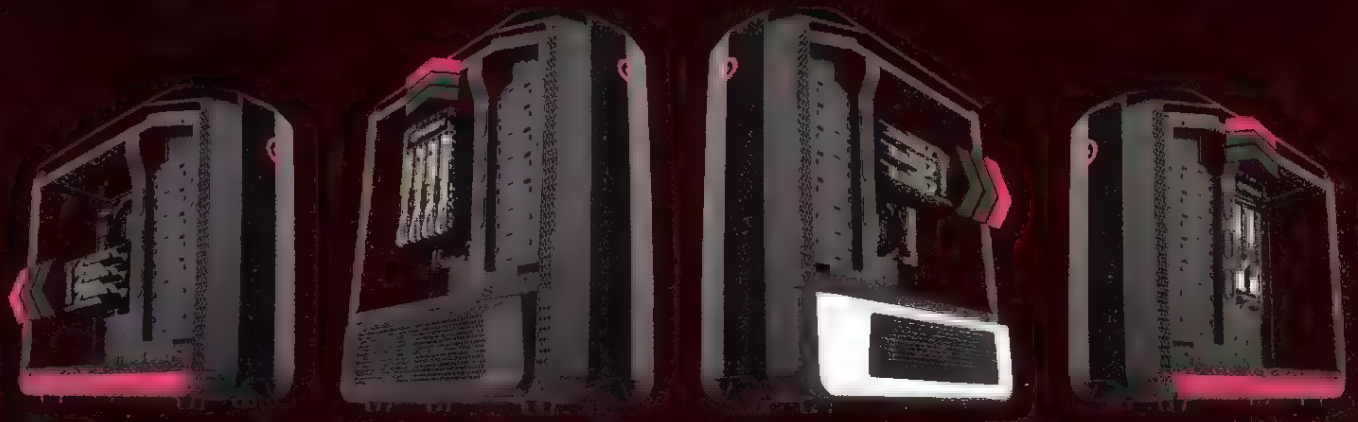

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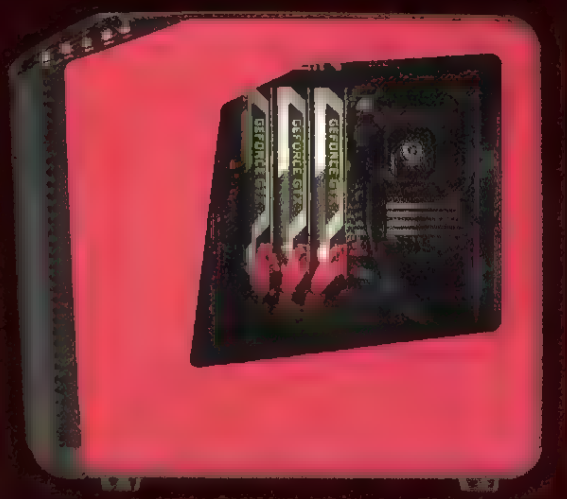

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Dynamic lighting is used to replicate the look of the film.

Lockers. They're great, aren't they? You can keep your coat in them, pin up some photos, even squeeze inside one and close the door if you feel the need. I am midway through a 40-minute session with *Alien: Isolation*, and I've suddenly acquired a very pressing need to climb inside one.

It's seen me. At least, I think it's seen me. Giger's monster is standing about 25 feet away, at the dark end of a long curving corridor. I was—stupidly, perhaps—following it, figuring that if I could slip past, I would have a short run to the ladder that would get me out of this half-ruined section of the station.

The alien turns, slightly, and its eyeless head tilts just enough to bring me into what I presume is its line of sight. It pivots and starts to move and suddenly breaking eye contact with it feels like the most important thing in the world. When I entered this area I'd meticulously combed the edge of the room looking for a solution to a situation like this. I memorized the location of each bank of lockers, observing that I could tap a button to climb inside if I needed to. I need to.

Ready or not

I hear it clank-clank-clank across the gantry as it sprints to investigate, but I get inside the locker before it can tell where I've gone. It's not stupid, though. The alien stalks the immediate area, notices the lockers, and comes over to investigate. I peer through the grill and find myself face to face with it. Saliva pours from its twin jaws. A prompt tells me that I can hold a button to hold my breath, and that it's possible to lean away so that it won't see me. I do both.

I'm playing on a PC using an Xbox controller, and it's actually a natural fit for the game—despite the first-person perspective. *Alien: Isolation* allows for tiny gradations of analog movement, from leans and peeks to—in this case—a kind of terrified squat. The alien loses interest in the locker and turns away. I bring up my motion detector and watch it recede, until it enters an adjacent room out of my sight.

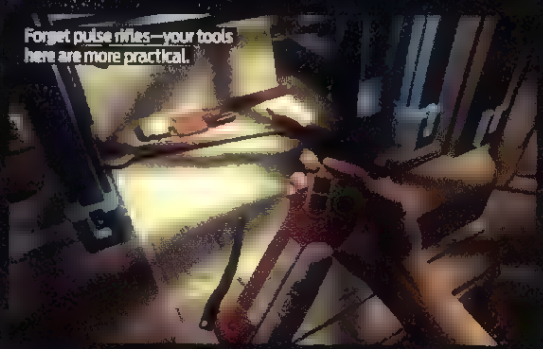
Games confront me with big decisions all the time. I've adjudicated the fates of planets and sent well-liked characters to their deaths. Mustering the courage to climb out of that locker is as tough a choice as I've ever made. I wait a moment longer, just to be sure. Lockers are pretty great, I think. Maybe I'll stay.

It has taken the better part of a decade for Creative Assembly to bring *Alien: Isolation* into being, and what it's produced is very exciting. Alien hardly had a good 2013, as movie licenses go, and *Colonial Marines*' very public failure is alluded to—if never explicitly addressed—as Creative Assembly and Sega introduce this new take on the series to the world.

But it's not just Gearbox's wonky FPS that is being redressed. It's the AvP series, the action games that preceded it, and the later movies. *Alien: Isolation* is not an *Aliens* game—it's an *Alien* game, rooted in the tone and themes of the original film. Cameron's marines, dropships, and pulse rifles don't appear. There is a single xenomorph, and it doesn't fling itself around the environment like a velociraptor full of helium. It stalks, it hunts, and it kills you if it can. You might look at the screenshots and think "sci-fi FPS"—don't. Think *Amnesia* in space.

You play as Ripley's daughter Amanda, 15 years after the disappearance of her mother at the end of the first film. In that time she's grown up and—following her

If it's close enough to take a selfie, you're already dead.


Forget pulse rifles—your tools here are more practical.

Freedom! Bright, noisy, alien-attracting freedom.

"I peer through the grill and find myself face to face with it."

mother's footsteps in the first of several ways—joined the Weyland-Yutani corporation as an engineer. When she discovers that the Nostromo's black box recorder has been located at a remote space station, she signs on with a mission to investigate. Her team finds the station—Sevastopol—in disarray, its inhabitants scattered and desperate thanks to the predations of our eight-foot-tall, acid-blooded friend.

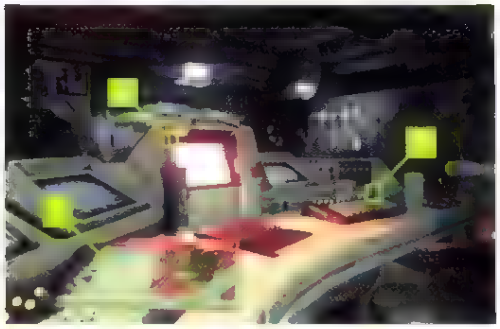
Old world charm

Sevastopol has been created with the help of Fox's movie archive, and I'm shown art and prop diagrams that demonstrate an extraordinary attention to detail on Creative Assembly's part. User interface designer Jon McKellan explains that they have created nothing for the game that could not be created on a movie lot in 1979: this is a vision of the future as it was thought of in the past, with none of *Prometheus*'s holographic interfaces or flying scanning balls. Think BBC Micro keyboards, enormous mobile phones, and VHS.

This attention to detail is apparent throughout the game. Ripley doesn't carry weapons in the traditional sense—in the section I played, her key tools were a handheld motion tracker, a hacking device, and a flashlight. The light is adjustable, but I didn't use it because I'd been warned in advance that its beam could tip off the alien to my location—and I'd rather squat in the dark than be impaled, generally speaking. The hacking tool forms the basis of a minigame that, in this case, was used to extract some key data from a PC right before the alien made its entrance. In the final game, you may have to complete this straightforward puzzle under more substantial duress.

The device itself is the lovechild of a WWII radio and an old-school portable TV—another nod to the original film's take on technology—and after tuning it in you're asked

Reimagining the future, retro-style



Postcards and magazines

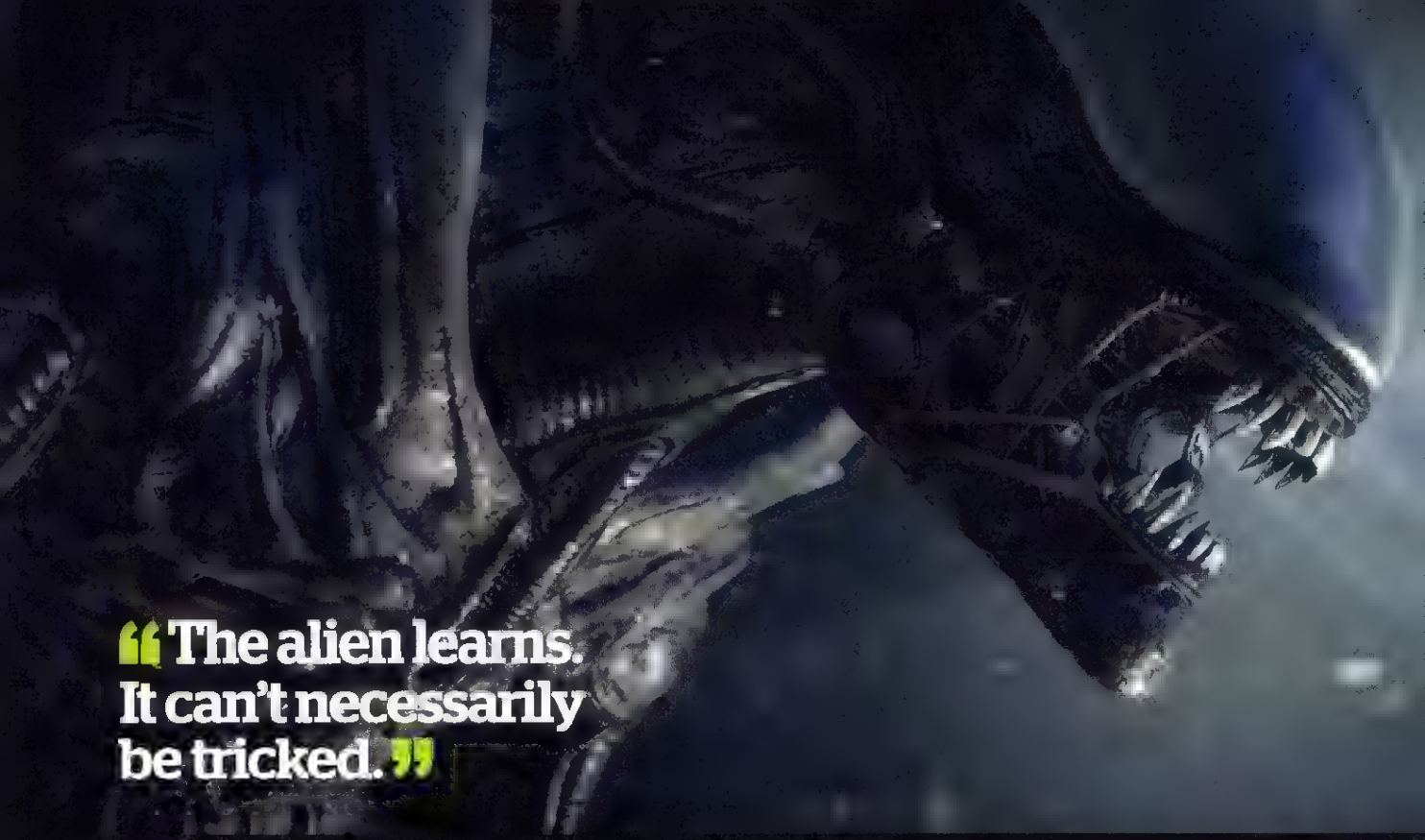
This is a world where iPads never happened, and paper still exists. What a thought. You'll find old-style dead tree media like this on desks and in lockers

CRT monitors

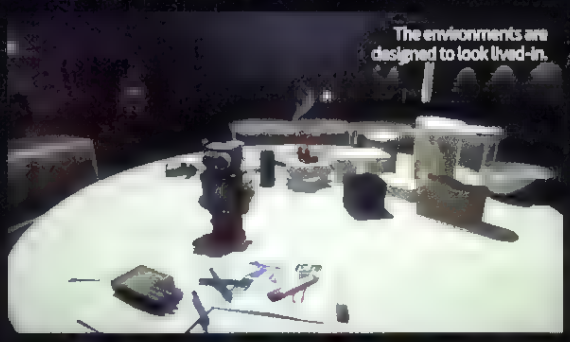
No holograms or flat screens, chunky two-tone monitors are the rule. This extends to all of the game's technology, including your hacking tool

Massive keyboards

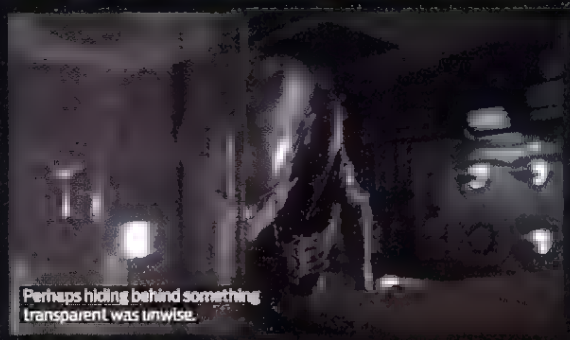
Forget touchscreens. This is an age of toggle switches, rubber buttons, and keyboards that look like you should be playing *Number Munchers* on them



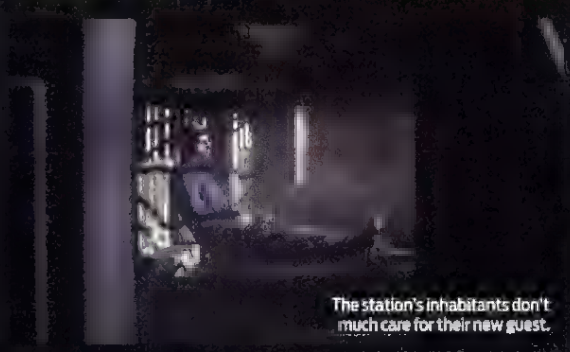
"The alien learns. It can't necessarily be tricked."



The environments are designed to look lived-in.



Perhaps hiding behind something transparent was unwise.



The station's inhabitants don't much care for their new guest.

to dial in a particular geometric shape before a time limit expires. It's designed to give you the sense that you're hammering in commands that could save your life as danger approaches—and you really *are* in danger.

Because *Isolation*'s alien is not cannon fodder. It's substantially taller and more humanoid than traditional game interpretations of the creature have been, and creative lead Al Hope points out that, in the original movie, you generally don't see it move very fast. "From the outset, that was the alien we were aiming for," he says. "A creature that looks down on the player. There have been depictions of the alien where they're more like angry dogs—below your waist. We wanted something dominant, monolithic." The restoration of details from Giger's original design, such as the outline of a human skull behind its face, establish that this is a return to form, not another videogame mutation.

In the demo, the alien entered the level at a set point. In the final game, it might enter any environment at any point if you make too much noise. It is, after all, hunting you. "Once you've met the alien, that's it," Hope says. "When it appears from then on is very much dynamic."

It has no set movement pattern or route, instead using its own intelligence to follow sights and sounds around the level. My adventure in the locker was specific to me, a product of a dozen systems working together to create a horror movie on the fly.

"It's been a long journey for us in order to be able to create that," Hope says. "It's a very difficult creature to animate. It looked like a bloke in a suit for a while, or a hockey player. We had throw away what we knew about old approaches to delivering character animation, and go for something much more subtle."

It's alive

The creature's movements aren't canned animations. The way it moves is intended to give you some sense of what it knows and where its focus is. If it doesn't know where you are, it'll prowl—tail flicking at the environment, mostly upright, moving as silently as possible. When it clocks you, it freezes—head snapping towards you and lowering, body hunching forward as it moves into a headlong sprint. At these moments the game's soundscape will emphasize its footsteps and your own breathing, and then if it catches you you'll be treated to one of many first-person depictions of what it might be like to be caught by Giger's monster. It's horrible—in a good way.

"We want it to feel personal, like it's happening to you," says Jon McKellan. "We could go over the top, and I think that would kill it. By being subtle, we give people an idea they can extrapolate from."

This is a stealth game at its heart, and like *Dishonored* or *Hitman* it's ultimately about information—what

There's no UI—you have to bring up the motion tracker manually.

you know, what your target knows, and how you can use that to your advantage. Unlike those games, however, *you're* the target. The feeling of being pursued is a rapid route to some pretty primal emotional responses, and I felt that the game was genuinely testing my awareness, courage, and initiative—personal traits, not gaming skills. At the very least, my special degree of cowardice made me the only journalist at the event to beat the demo without dying. I think I've got a childhood spent hiding in school lockers to thank for that.

Level design will play a huge role in keeping this experience varied over the course of the campaign, as will the tasks you're asked to perform. At the end of the demonstration, I pressed a button to cycle an airlock, creating a great deal of sound and light and starting a nonspecific timer that I'd have to wait out before I could escape. This sent me back into my safety locker, and as soon as the alien finished looking for me by the airlock it made a beeline for it—the last place it had suspected I was hiding.

"The alien learns," Al Hope tells me. "It can't necessarily be tricked. You might get away with it once, but after that it'll think, 'hang on, I've been played.'"

This gives the developers the freedom to create challenges in interesting ways. Simply removing lockers from the equation would probably be enough to do for me, but the alien's own adaptation will likewise force players to change their approach. The game will include other ways to deter or distract the monster, few of which they're willing to talk about at the moment. But the inclusion of lootable bits and bobs in the demo suggests that crafting items will play a role.

Not in the script

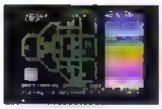
It's suggested that you'll encounter other enemies—likely dangerous survivors of Sevastopol's current crisis. While human-on-human violence isn't unprecedented in the films, it'd be a shame if *Isolation* devolved into a *Colonial Marines*-style FPS. That said, the sequence I played was impressive enough that the final game could survive the occasional action sequence if it manages to deliver open-ended horror sequences of that caliber.

One of the most exciting things about *Isolation*, though, is the fact that it's a big-budget licensed game with a serious, systems-led design ticking away under the hood. The developer understands that scripted spectacle isn't ultimately what makes games great, and the idea of seeing that sentiment return to game development as a whole is tremendously promising.

"We're not fans of taking control away from the player unless we really, *really* have to," Al Hope says. By putting control in the hands of the players, Creative Assembly is giving them the power to find their own scares. And as my time with *Isolation* proves, they'll find them in the strangest places. ■

Chris Thursten

Timeline



Alien

Release

The Spectrum Alien game was effective despite its simplicity thanks to clever randomization. You never knew when the alien would attack.

Scare-o-meter

AvP Arcade

Release

The height of '90s comic-book *Alien* it's basically *Contra* with xenomorphs. Substantially less scary than the sketchy arcades you'd find it in.

Scare-o-meter

Alien Trilogy

Release

Answers the question "what would happen if Ripley was played by the *Doom* marine?" A decent shooter, but not a great fit for the subject matter.

Scare-o-meter

Alien vs. Predator

Release

The game that most notably figured out that the motion tracker is scarier than the monster itself. A serious attempt to nail the atmosphere.

Scare-o-meter

Aliens: Colonial Marines

Release

Weird AI and a wonky pace made this a high-profile failure. It'll be a while before anyone revisits Cameron's take on the series.

Scare-o-meter

Need to know

What is it?
An action-RPG that has you slaughtering hordes of creatures in a dark land

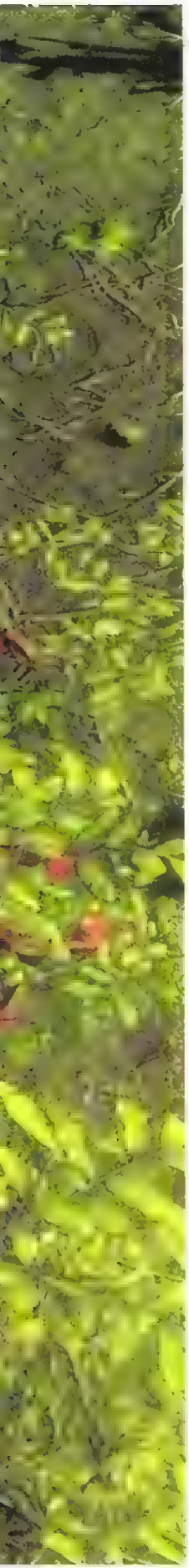
Influenced by
Diablo, Final Fantasy 7 and *10*

Play it on
1.4GHz CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 7800GT/Radeon X1950, 5GB HDD

Alternatively
Diablo I, 90%

Copy protection
Steam

"*Path of Exile* is free-to-play, and wonderfully generous with it."



FREE TO FLAY

Kill, loot, and level your way to action RPG splendor in **PATH OF EXILE** *by Tom Senior*

Compulsion is a dubious sort of pleasure, but it's what action RPGs excel at. With their slow leveling curves, gradually unlocking skills, and swelling hordes of foes, *Diablo*, *Titan Quest*, *Torchlight*, and now *Path of Exile* all aim to ensnare rather than instantly delight.

The 15-year-old formula has barely evolved, but it's still effective. You must always start in rags, punching zombies with your bare fists in some gloomy town, because any grander beginning would curtail your slow ascent to godhood. A start anywhere more glamorous than a dark field or *Path of Exile*'s grey beach would lessen the triumphant moment 12 hours later when you annihilate a 20-strong giant spider brood and think back to those first moments. Sometimes you'll find folk waiting beneath yellow exclamation marks to give you quests and deliver lore points in tiny boxes of text, but mostly you punch, loot, level up, equip your stolen gains, grow strong, and slowly mold your bedraggled vagrant into a killing machine.

It's a character arc of sorts, albeit one plotted to the sound of a thousand repetitive mouse-clicks, but that comes with a quiet satisfaction of its own, a feeling of incremental achievement earned over many hours. If you value that feeling, *Path of Exile* is the 200-hour time sink you're looking for.

Free-for-all

Your adventures take place on the cursed continent of Wraeclast. Each of the immediately playable character classes have been thrown out of their cushy homelands for various unimportant reasons, and must now carve out a new life for themselves, slicing up thousands of monsters in dark dungeons.

The game is free-to-play, and wonderfully generous with it. The microtransaction store is almost entirely stocked with cosmetic effects that make your weapons glow, or give your character new emotes. There are also a few convenience upgrades such as expanded item storage, which you won't need until you're very seriously invested in maxing out a few characters.

I mention this now because the game's granular skill system, which is based on a huge number of individual skill nodes, could so easily have been monetized to death. Grinding Gear Games should be commended for keeping its store separate from *Path of Exile*'s integral game mechanics.

The *Final Fantasy* series serves as an unusual source of inspiration for this skill system. Leveling up gives you a point to spend on the leveling board: a vast and daunting maze of connected nodes, each representing a stat increase. You plot a course across this board by spending leveling points to ignite adjacent nodes. Powerful gold-encrusted variants are scattered here and there, offering major stat buffs that can help you specialize your character.

I spent most of my time leveling a Duelist, a dexterous but powerful rogue type. He's one of *Path of Exile*'s seven classes, which also includes the magic-wielding Witch, the powerful Marauder, long-range specialist the Ranger, a Templar who's good at both whacking and zapping, a lithe assassin called The Shadow, and the Scion, an expert class that you have to play the game to unlock. Your class denotes your starting position on the leveling board, which positions you close to class-relevant buffs. Dexterity classes like the Duelist will have a short trip to dual-wielding and bow nodes, while magical classes like The Witch start closer to magic-power bonuses.

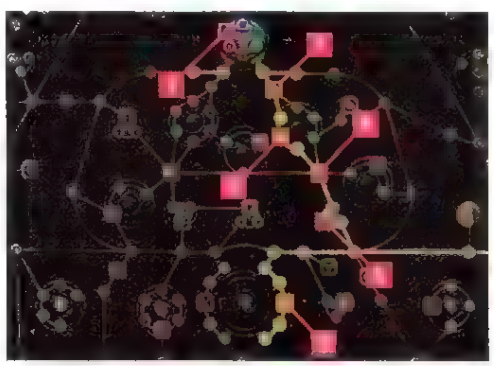
The Scion is challenging because she starts in the dead center of the board, between all other classes, but that also means she can become a powerful hybrid of your own design once you know your way around.

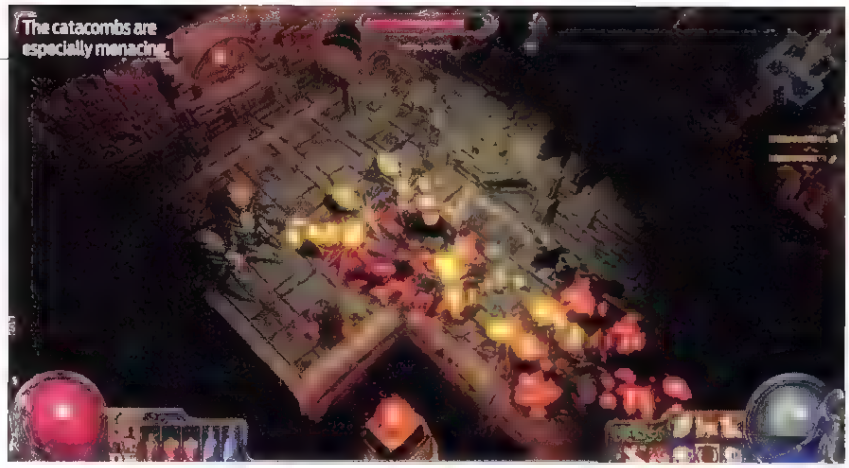
The best thing about the board is ▸

The longest journey

One character's path across *PoE*'s leveling board

1. Origin, your starting point
2. +Attack speed, faster punching!
3. +Dual wielding, twin rapiers FTW
4. +Attack speed, faster stabbing
5. +Block chance, safer stabbing
6. +Sword damage, deadlier stabbing




The catacombs are especially menacing.

Activate shrines for a brief deadly aura.

Arachnophobes should steer clear.

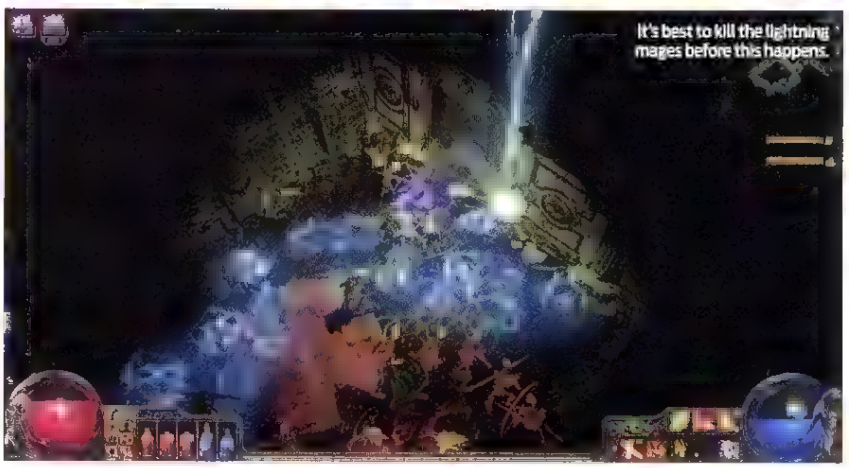
Flesh-eating monkeys are weak vs. fire traps.

This guy dual-wields wands like a pro.

Look out for the hordes of exploding squid.

PoE's plains are a bit, well, plain.

Occasional boss monsters boost the challenge.


It's best to kill the lightning mages before this happens.

that it links every class to every other class, which means I can eventually guide my Duelist into mage territory with enough levels. Plotting a path through all of your advances also provides a satisfying visualization of your character's progress, though I'd like to feel the impact of that progress on the battlefield. Most nodes offer an incremental stat bonus that only slightly improves the efficiency of your slaughter. Every +10 dexterity buff I light up makes my hero hit ever so-slightly faster, but I have to wait until I reach one of those golden nodes, with their plump 20 percent buffs, to enjoy noticeable knock-on.

It's a theorycrafter's paradise, however. The *Path of Exile* forums are overflowing with players peddling their latest character ideas. If you get bored of tailoring your own builds and want to fast track, you can sample the Duelist's "Facebreaker build using Infernal and Dominating Blow," or go for an "Explosive Arrow Marauder," or hundreds of others, each carefully turned over by other community members. Good knowledge of these builds is well rewarded by *Path of Exile*'s extremely popular community races, which challenge participants to rush as far as possible through the game in a two-hour sprint. It's a clever way to generate a sense of cohesion among disparate adventurers, and encourages players to come up with inventive high-speed characters.

Jewel-wielding

These extensive character development options are well supported by the skill system. Your character's abilities aren't unlocked on the leveling board, they take the form of skill gems that drop when you kill enemies and complete quests. You can use a skill in the field as long as you have the relevant gem slotted into your weapons or armor. Linked equipment slots enable you to use support gems to adjust your skills. For example, my Duelist's area-of-effect Cleave ability is in a slot connected to a support gem that infuses it with extra frost damage. These crystals gain levels along with you, becoming more powerful the longer you have them installed.

The formation of slots gouged into each piece of equipment is as important as the stat boosts they convey to your character, but these can be rearranged with one of *Path of Exile*'s large selection of—wait for it—orbs. Orbs reshuffle the magical properties of an item, re-roll the number and formation of the slots it has and upgrade ordinary items to uncommon or rare ones. Orbs ensure that every piece of equipment that drops can potentially be useful to your build, and are the centerpiece of *Path of Exile*'s barter economy. There is no money here. You exchange items for orb fragments that can combine to make functional item modifiers.

The cleverness behind this rethink of staid action RPG systems extends to your health and mana potions. No longer must you hoard them in hundred-high stacks. Instead you carry five magical flasks that refill with every kill. Inevitably, these flasks can have magical properties of their own, which increase the amount of health regenerated and the speed at which it regenerates.

Beaten track

Path of Exile strives against the influence of its recent competitors. The muted locales and exquisite claustrophobia of its dungeons reject *Torchlight*'s exuberant visuals. The intensive, detailed leveling options defy *Diablo III*'s relatively straightforward choices. *Path of Exile* is well placed to capture gamers alienated by Blizzard's new direction, although like its controversial older brother it still requires an internet connection to play.

It also can't match the visual splendor and satisfying feedback of *Diablo III*. The combat improves after the first few hours when you start fighting large and varied swarms, but occasional lag and desync issues can send your slashes right through monsters, and the varied and plentiful attacks lack the apocalyptic thwunk of *PoE*'s big-budget competitor. That might be because the engine lacks the physics capabilities to render responsive ragdolls. It's still entertaining to wade through *PoE*'s larger mobs, but the combat isn't quite best-in-class.

The plain fields and character models look a little dated, and the gear design stays firmly within the boundaries of *Path of Exile*'s grimy medieval aesthetic. That suits the game's deliberate lack of glamor, but limits the tactile pleasure of equipping ridiculously powerful kit. Extraordinary gear doesn't look extraordinary here, but for those already put off by Blizzard's famously enormous spiked pauldrons, that won't be a bad thing.

If you play action RPGs as a cathartic power trip, to slam into monstrous hordes and watch their bloody bodies ragdoll across the scenery, then *Path of Exile* will seem dry. It's not a game about instant gratification, it's about slowly forging an inventive character over three acts and three difficulty tiers.

Once it has its claws firmly in, *Path of Exile* is as compulsive as any game in its class. After a few hours the combat becomes automatic. The objectives are moot, the quests, characters, and creatures incidental. Every stab, spent arrow, and slash is in service of the real journey across that vast leveling board. Every 500 to 1,000 clicks lights up another node, and the little warrior mannequin takes another step away from being a template and toward something that's uniquely yours. ■

Gearhead

Skilling up for success with *PoE*'s gems

Double Strike (Top gem) Good vs bosses this quick one-two focuses damage

Ice Damage (Bottom gem) Adds ice to Double Strike giving it a chance to slow enemies

Cleave (Left gem) Slash several opponents at once with a wide deadly arc

Rain of Arrows An area-of-effect bow attack that showers foes

Anger (Right gem) A burning aura that sets nearby enemies on fire

Burning Arrow A flaming bow attack that can ignite an enemy and deal damage over time

Fire Trap Up to three of these proximity mines can be thrown at a time

> "The real journey is across that vast leveling board."

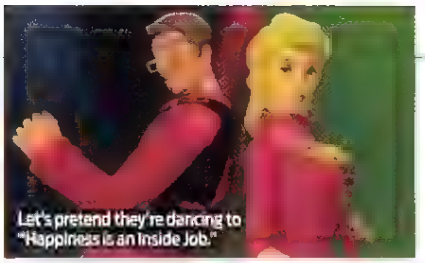
Verdict

An exceptionally generous free-to-play action-RPG. What it lacks in punch it makes up for in depth and value for money

PC GAMER **84**

◆ **Expect to pay** Free-to-play, $5 to $30 for cosmetic upgrades ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Developer** Grinding Gear Games ◆ **Publisher** Grinding Gear Games ◆ **Multiplayer** Up to six, co-op ◆ **Link** www.pathofexile.com

Nico is still ambitious but flawed; George is still an unthreatening man in slacks.



Let's pretend they're dancing to "Happiness is an Inside Job."

Even a urinating cherub is a weapon in the hands of a real hero.

George didn't care what the other adventurers said: he looked fabulous.

Familiar faces return, alongside new ones like the idiotic detective Navet.

CHARMER

Conspiracy and eccentricity in **BROKEN SWORD 5: THE SERPENT'S CURSE PART 1** *by Matt Elliott*

Need to know

What is it?
Crowdfunded point and click adventure of sinister paintings and papal persecution

Influenced by
Beneath A Steel Sky, *Broken Sword*, anything by Pendulo Studios

Play it on
Almost anything

Alternatively
The Raven: Legacy of a Master Thief

Copy protection
Steam

If you've never played a *Broken Sword* game, you're unlikely to start with the *Serpent's Curse*. If, however, you funded the Kickstarter or eagerly followed every update for signs that this could compare to the Templar-bothering original, then this game is literally made for you.

An unlikely set of circumstances reunites series heroes George and Nico. He's working as an insurance assessor and she's still a journalist. They barely have time to exchange pleasantries before a gallery owner is shot and a painting, The Maledicció, is stolen. Since *Serpent's Curse* is split into two halves, *Part 1* is more about exposition than it is about dangling from cable cars – and this unfortunately means you'll have to wait for that inevitable conspiracy to unravel. The good news is that the story is strong enough for you to actually care. Even if you spend much of this episode doing more mundane things such as chasing the painting's provenance, this is the most convincing *Broken Sword* game since the first.

That means that it's funny, too. Never laugh-out-loud hilarious, just amusing. Every character you meet is harmlessly odd – I think clairvoyant florists and a ruffian with a sideline in topiary – and George and Nico remain one of gaming's greatest couples. The script is consistently charming, and the dialogue bright enough that you'll be emptying your pockets to everyone you meet, just to hear their reactions. At one point I deceived a drunken widow with an emergency beard made from hair taken from a stuffed dog, and it didn't feel strange at all. Welcome home, *Broken Sword*.

Despite what it might sound like, this fifth game is actually the least obscure. Puzzles feel simpler, and the crisp presentation makes it easier to see everything. There is a hint system, but you'll very rarely need to use it. Making the wrong choice is also never punished disappointingly, the death scenes from the first two games are gone entirely. Perhaps there's a chance they'll be coming back later, as the Cauldron of Inescapable Peril begins to froth, but this is a game that lets you boldly try using the matchbox-containing-cockroach with the seagull without fear of fatal reprisals.

Returning to *Broken Sword* is a gently nostalgic buzz. The game's backgrounds are deep, colorful, and full of interest, and there's that same sense of thrill from visiting a new location. Surprisingly, the 3D models also work: less graceful than the Disney-like animated sprites, but they nevertheless feel right.

More importantly, the music is once again handled by Barrington Pheloung: a score that gracefully swells when you solve a puzzle and quietly hints at ancient conspiracy throughout. Is all of this enough? That largely depends on the resolution provided by *The Serpent's Curse Part 2*. But so far, it feels massively satisfying to have Nico and George back. ■

Verdict

Less technically adept than modern competitors but *The Serpent's Curse Part 1* is a pleasing start to a new *Broken Sword* story

PC GAMER **79**

◆ **Expect to pay** $25 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Developer** Revolution Software ◆ **Publisher** Revolution Software ◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** www.revolution.co.uk/games/bs5

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Releases February 25, 2014

RATING PENDING
RP
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

HEROIC

INJUSTICE: GODS AMONG US ULTIMATE EDITION

values over the top combat over comic canon *by Cory Banks*

Need to know

What is it?
A surprisingly cinematic fighting game starring Earth's mightiest heroes and villains

Influenced by
Mortal Kombat
Crisis on Infinite Earths

Play it on
3.34GHz CPU, 8GB RAM
AMD Radeon 6950

Alternatively
Mortal Kombat: Komplete Edition, 67%

Copy protection
Steam

Who would win a fight: Batman or Superman? It's an age-old question for comic book fans, and the reason a game like *Injustice: Gods Among Us Ultimate Edition* exists. We want to see our favorite heroes and villains beat the snot out of each other.

NetherRealm Studios has found a suitably comic book way for this to happen, using a dimension-hopping story to smash alternative versions of familiar characters against one another. It's a conceit typical of the DC Comics multiverse, but it opens the door for *Injustice*'s greatest strength: its story mode.

Much like its stablemate *Mortal Kombat: Komplete Edition*, *Injustice: Ultimate Edition*'s main single-player mode is an eight-hour campaign told from multiple perspectives. Each chapter puts you in control of a different character—including the villains—and mixes up traditional 1-vs-1 fights with QTE minigames. The story mode autosaves at each fight so if you lose you can quickly start again, but the transitions between smooth 60fps fights and the pre-rendered 30fps movie cinematics can be a little jarring. The story's quality compares pretty well with the recent Justice League animated series—it's not Shakespeare, but I wanted to find out what was going to happen next.

> "I'll never get tired of launching a foe into near-Earth orbit."

Injustification

NetherRealm Studios has streamlined its typical *Mortal Kombat* fighting engine into a four-button configuration. Each of the game's 30 characters have light, medium, and heavy attacks as well as a quick button for a "character trait" power. Batman summons robot bat-droids, while Green Lantern glows, well, green, and hits harder for a short time. You can throw enemies with a simple tap of LB, or, if your Super Power gauge is full, pull both trigger buttons for an ultra combo that launches into a character-specific cutscene of carnage. It's nice that these spectacles are easy to pull off, especially compared to more complicated fighting games, and I'll never tire of launching a foe into near-Earth orbit as Superman, then slamming them back down for massive damage. But the ease of use of these moves also means you'll see these cutscenes a *lot*.

Each stage also includes interactive elements: Aquaman's Atlantis level, for example, lets you shatter its sides to drown your foe in a massive tidal wave. Many levels have secondary areas as well. With a well-timed kick, I sent Hawkgirl tumbling forcefully through the outer walls of Wayne Manor, right through to the mansion's dining room.

Outside of Battle mode, which offers a wide variety of ladder-style challenges, *Injustice*'s big time sink is S.T.A.R. Labs, where you try to complete more than 240 character-specific challenges that serve to teach you the game's more complex techniques. Points earned here and in other modes let you unlock concept art, music, and more in the Hall of Justice Archives. Notably, new character skins are already unlocked in *Injustice: Ultimate Edition*, as are the console version's six DLC characters.

Injustice's longevity is tied to its multiplayer, which is currently in a poorer state. Local battles work without a hitch, but are limited to 1-vs-1 fights. Online is a different story: finding someone to play against often doesn't work, and once it does, the incredible levels of input lag make fighting frustrating. King of the Hill and Survival modes sound great, but unless the lag issues are resolved soon, they're wasted. If NetherRealm can get its online issues sorted, *Injustice* could be a top-

Here comes a new challenger

Injustice's *Ultimate Edition* adds six new combatants to the roster

Lobo
Alien bounty hunter biker, crude dude. Product of excessively violent 90s comics

Martian Manhunter
Last member of the Martian race turns to fighting crime on Earth

Batgirl
Inspired by Batman. Barbara Gordon dons a suit and fights crime with cool gadgets

Zatanna
Scantily clad stage illusionist and leg sorceress. JLA member, pal of Bruce Wayne

Zod
War lord of Krypton, once trapped in Phantom Zone. Megalomaniac

Scorpion
Undead ninja from *Mortal Kombat*, pulled in through the power of cross-branding

◆ **Expect to pay** $50 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Developer** NetherRealm Studios, High Voltage Software
◆ **Publisher** Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment ◆ **Multiplayer** Local or online ◆ **Link** www.injustice.com

Verdict

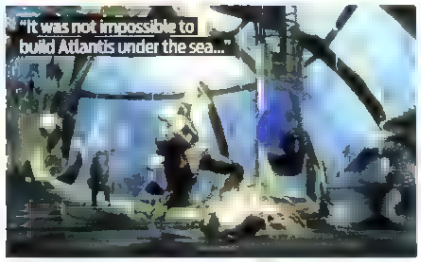
A superhero brawler that's bursting with content and fan service, but held back by flaky online code

PC GAMER **80**

Oh, get a room.

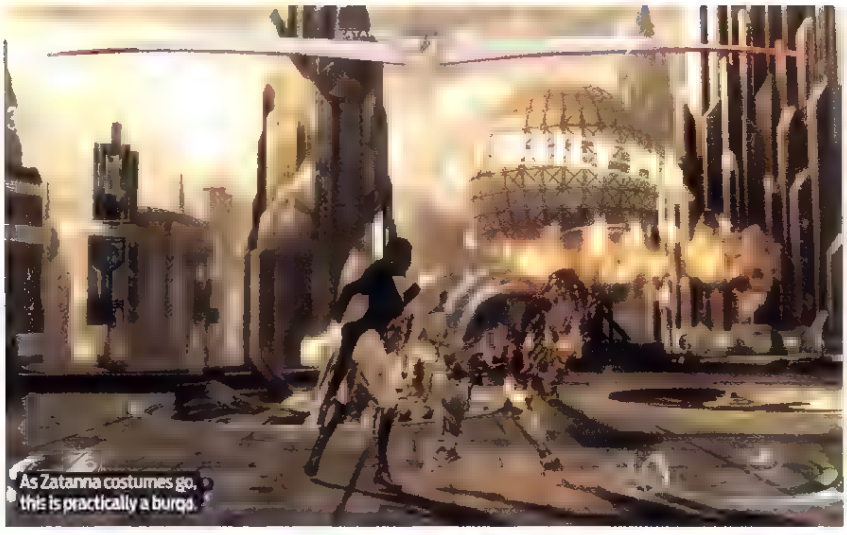
He seems to be making a decent fist of things.

We've seen this somewhere before.


"It was not impossible to build Atlantis under the sea..."

No Harley, not that kind of flash.

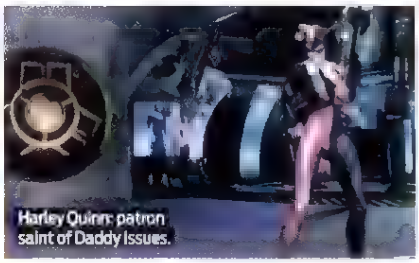
Ah, the old Summon National Express move.

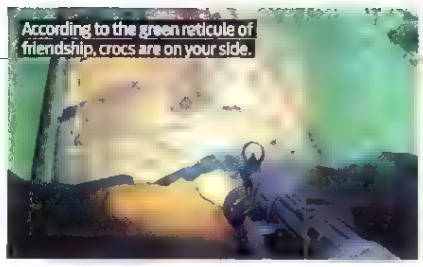

As Zatanna costumes go, this is practically a burqa.

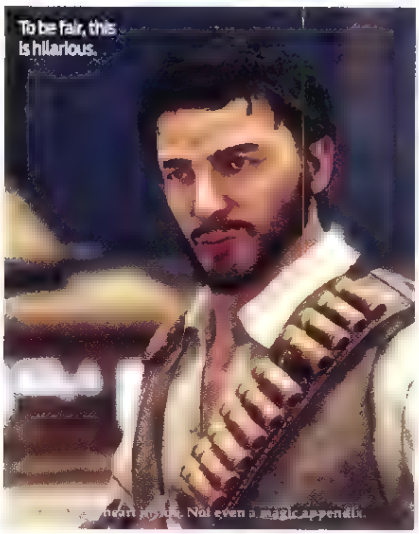
"I'm Bane! Yes, that's my name!"

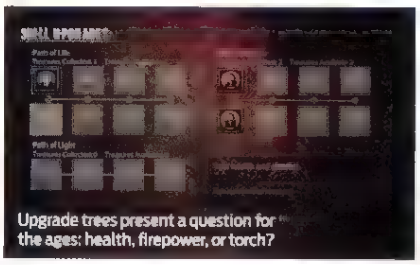
Nobody calls him "Marvin" and lives.

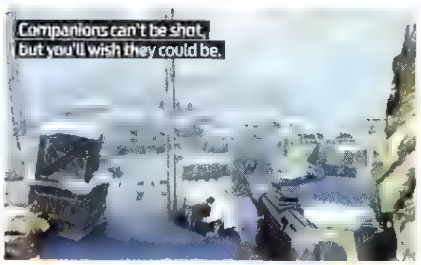
Superman: cosmic bully.


Harley Quinn: patron saint of Daddy Issues.









INDIANA GROANS

Explore tombs, ruins, and the depths of your own despair in **DEADFALL ADVENTURES** *by Ben Griffin*

Need to know

What is it?
A globe trotting FPS where players hunt treasure in exotic corners of the world

Influenced by
Uncharted Indiana Jones

Play it on
Core 2 Duo, 2GB RAM

Alternatively
Painkiller Hell and Damnation, 98%

Copy protection
Steam

"The game uses Unreal Engine 3 to produce one of the most jaw dropping spectacles this generation has enjoyed," *Deadfall Adventures*'s website boasts. "Fiendish puzzles, deadly traps and stunning set pieces will make this one of the greatest adventures ever told let alone played." The grandstanding is clearly at odds with reality, here

It's at least correct to say you play as James Lee Quatermain, descendant of famous adventurer Allan Quatermain, as he races Nazis to a powerful artifact. And beware, these are the kind of Nazis who love appearing from the shadows while applauding condescendingly and saying something like, "well done, very well done."

Annoyingly, this artifact has been split up and hidden in Guatemalan jungles, under Egyptian sands, and at Arctic outposts.

Given that the developer has *Painkiller: Hell & Damnation* on its résumé, *Deadfall* surprisingly features more brain-bending than brain-rending. There are "angle the mirror" puzzles, "match the symbol" puzzles, "stand on the switch" puzzles, and "place this thing in that thing" puzzles. All fail the basic requirement of, you know, puzzling. One has you cross pressure-sensitive plates that trigger spears, but both your AI companion and ink-blotted notepad reveal the route before you even take a step

Sporadic combat tries to inject energy into the proceedings. It achieves the opposite. The WWII weaponry feels lightweight and lifeless—by this point, shooting a Nazi with an MP-38 *in real life* would feel played out. Even using your unaccountably magic torch to blind soldiers and set mummies alight is a trick taught by Alan Wake.

The puzzles may be witless, the combat frail, but the dialogue and characterization are brilliant in their idiocy "I saved your well shaped ass in Egypt, remember?" smarms our hero. He's clearly written as some dry witted matinee idol but his writers lack both dryness and wit. "You had me at well shaped," replies Jennifer, herself intended as a capable heroine, a thing she loves pointing out during firefights by repeating the line, "Still think I'm a rookie, Quatermain?" Answer: yes. There's also a Nazi double agent with really short arms (never explained).

There's a certain innocent charm to fighting jungle tribesmen and groaning mummies. But in attempting good clean fun, it misses out on the most important bit—fun.

An uninspired multiplayer contains such modes as deathmatch and capture-the-artifact, and equally uninspired four-player survival. Needless additions.

Imagine *Uncharted* without Naughty Dog's budget. Imagine *Call of Duty* without meaty weapons or cinematic set pieces. Imagine if Indiana Jones starred a bearded ham. That's *Deadfall Adventures*, and it's pretty unimaginative. ■

Verdict

This clumsy, dated misadventure steals from all over and contributes no ideas of its own. Brilliantly bad dialog, though

PC GAMER **41**

◆ **Expect to pay** $40 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Developer** The Farm 51 ◆ **Publisher** Nordic Games
◆ **Multiplayer** Up to 4 ◆ **Link** www.deadfallgame.com/en/dfnew

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DEFECTIVE

Battling boredom and bugs in **X: REBIRTH**, the galactically awful space sim *by Andy Kelly*

Need to know

What is it?
An ambitious space sim, seven years in the making

Influenced by
Eve

Play it on
2GHz CPU, 4GB RAM, 1GB graphics card

Alternatively
EVE Online 86%

Copy protection
Steam

When I was first set loose in *X: Rebirth*'s vast universe, I was convinced it was going to be amazing. That "34" on Metacritic couldn't possibly be accurate. I'm in space! In a spaceship! But I quickly realized that this is, in fact, a colossal missed opportunity. A supernova of bugs and baffling game design that refuses to let you have any fun, no matter how hard you try.

First problem: you only get to pilot one ship, the horribly named Albion Skunk. You can explore it using a first-person mode, which could have been fun if there were more than two rooms to it, and if anything was even slightly interactive.

You have a separate ship for trading that follows you around and has to be given orders. You can't cancel an order without editing your save file, and sometimes it just refuses to move. It's like I'm dragging a badly-behaved toddler around a shopping center. Then there's your co-pilot, Yisha. For a character you spend the entire game with, and who's almost constantly talking, you'd think they would have hired someone with some basic acting ability to speak her lines. But while you'll eventually grow used to her awkward delivery, you'll never stop cursing how useless she is. Case in point: if you're piloting a drone, and enemies start attacking the Skunk, she'll just sit there dumbly. Couldn't you, like, move, or fight back, or *something*?

Waste of space

The game has a problem with humans generally. On stations which all look identical, incidentally, you'll talk to NPCs, who are terrifying, slot-mouthed, dead-eyed mannequins. While space itself feels nicely alive, teeming with traffic and huge ships lumbering back and forth, the interiors feel eerily lifeless. In a nightclub I hear the ambient sound of people drinking and laughing, but it's empty except for two people standing motionless by the bar. Not exactly a colorful trip to Deep Space Nine.

Rebirth fares much better when you're in space. Some messy shadows aside, it's a good-looking game, with colorful nebulas, asteroids, planets, and stars providing a vivid cosmic backdrop. The combat is like jousting in space. Ships make passes at each other, firing a volley of shots when they get close and hoping some connect. Or you can use heat-seeking missiles. Hit the spacebar and you can strafe, FPS-style. Hit it again to steer with the mouse. The movement feels nice and weighty.

The biggest problem is that there's nothing fun to do. There are countless stations, jobs, contracts, and ways to make money, but it's all deeply tedious, and utterly free of personality. The characters you talk to cycle through the same few dumb lines. The missions are rote. It's only in the (dreadful) story that you'll find any excitement: its large-scale space battles are at least genuinely impressive to behold.

Think about how rich and full of character the *Mass Effect* universe is. Now imagine the exact opposite and you have *X: Rebirth*'s charmless world. I just don't want to be here.

Some severe patching is needed. There are more bugs and broken missions than I have space to list here, and save-file editing is almost always the go-to solution, which is just absurd when you realize they're charging $50 for the pleasure. It feels like an Early Access game. But even if they iron out the flaws, *X: Rebirth* is just so innately unlikable, and so deathly boring, that I think it may be beyond help. ■

More bugs and broken missions than I have space to list.

Waste of space

Things more useful than co-pilot Yisha Tarren

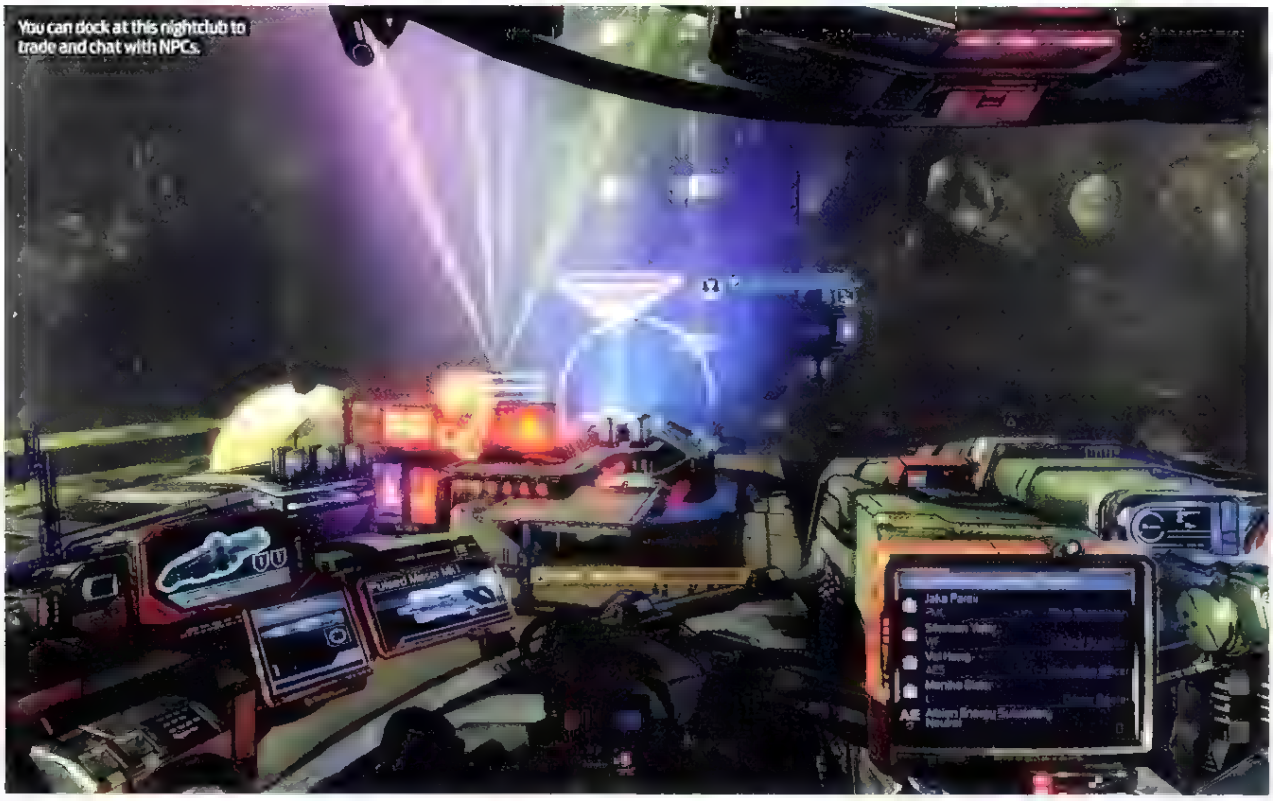
◆ **Expect to pay** $50 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Developer** Egosoft ◆ **Publisher** Deep Silver ◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** www.xrebirth.com

X misses the spot. The occasional bit of spectacle can't save this boring, broken, and charmless space simulation.

PC GAMER **39**

The mannequin-like characters are unconvincing.

There's a mod to remove your co-pilot's boob window.


You can dock at this nightclub to trade and chat with NPCs.

Zones are clogged with traffic, space stations, and asteroids.

You don't get to pilot anything this big.

It's the future, but people still love booze.

A DULL BLADE

CHIVALRY: DEADLIEST WARRIOR delivers some blood-soaked lols, but quickly wears thin ***by Andy Chalk***

Need to know

What is it?
First-person multiplayer combat pitting six historical warriors against each other

Influenced by
300, Pirates of the Caribbean

Play it on
Dual core CPU, 4GB RAM, GeForce 8800GT/Radeon 3870, 64-bit OS. *Chivalry: Medieval Warfare* required

Alternatively
War of the Roses, 77%

Copy protection
Steam

If you're familiar with the *Deadliest Warrior* TV show, you know what's in store with this, the new DLC release for *Chivalry: Medieval Warfare*. It pits six warrior archetypes against each other in online multiplayer combat: samurai, ninja, Viking, knight, Spartan, and pirate. Each has unique strengths and weaknesses. Heavily armored knights are lumbering but hit like an angry Hulk; ninja are protected by nothing but speed and smoke but will kill you five times before you hit the ground.

The simple single-player tutorial is where I got my first hint that all was not well. The hit detection was imprecise: the lines tracing my weapon's path in "Visualization Training" would sometimes cut through an enemy's extremities without causing damage, while thrown weapons that missed would occasionally still stick and end up orbiting just outside their intended victim. The one-minute countdown in the "Ranged Training" area was broken to the point of near uselessness, and the trainer bot named John the Chef Master — don't ask me to explain — respawned whenever I entered a training room, then died (spontaneously and explosively) when I left.

The sub-par graphics, stiff animation, and low-stamina heavy breathing sound effect all betrayed *Warrior* as a low-budget, low-effort tie-in to a television show canceled two years ago. But something unexpected happened when I abandoned training and leapt into the online action. I had some fun.

It's by no means a good game, but it is visceral. The shouts of angry men mix with the thud of weapons on armor, meat, and bone. Taking a guy's head off with a well-placed swing is alarmingly rewarding. One of the highlights came when I turned to see a samurai wielding a club the size of an oak tree rushing at me from behind. I had just enough time to marvel at the insanity of it all before he swung, sending everything from my neck up into the next time zone. It's meaty, it's crunchy, it's downright personal. I didn't just kill guys, I messed them up. Bad.

Sadly, maps suitable for 64-player brawls seem awfully big and lonely when just a half-dozen warriors are slugging it out in a free-for-all. With no overhead map to help find the action, I often felt like I was spending more time looking for a fight than actually fighting one. Clipping errors are common, and a couple of times I found myself running past a thrown axe that was seemingly stuck in some invisible, untouchable wall. Even when *Warrior* is at its best, roughness is inescapable.

It doesn't take long before the thrill of dressing up like a pirate and rushing headlong at an armored knight wears thin; then everything that characterizes this as low-budget shovelware sinks in. With a night or two of good times under your belt, you'll likely find yourself moving on to better things. ■

PC GAMER 55

Slapstick dismemberment is fun for a while, but this has neither the depth nor the polish to stay in the fight for long.

◆ **Expect to pay** $15 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Developer** Torn Banner Studios ◆ **Publisher** Torn Banner Studios ◆ **Multiplayer** Up to 64 ◆ **Link** www.tornbanner.com/deadliestwarrior

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PLANE AND SIMPLE

Daringly accessible, **WORLD OF WARPLANES** brings air combat to all, but loses something along the way *by Rob Zacny*

Need to know

What is it?
An online air combat game that eschews realism for fast-paced fun

Influenced by
WWII dogfights, Secret Weapons of the Luftwaffe

Play it on
2.6GHz CPU, 3GB RAM, GeForce 8600GT or equivalent

Alternatively
War Thunder, not reviewed

Copy protection
Log-in account

A dogfighting multiplayer game based on the combat aircraft of World War II and Korea never seemed like a natural fit for mouse and keyboard. The developer of *World of Warplanes* faced an almost insurmountable dilemma: if its game was easy to control, it wouldn't feel like actual flying and dogfighting, and if it did feel authentic, it would most likely put off most of its intended audience.

Yet somehow, Wargaming.net pulled off a miracle, and made a fun for-all dogfighting game that is recognizably in the tradition of *Red Baron* or *Secret Weapons of the Luftwaffe*. It feels shockingly natural with mouse and keyboard controls, and I spent my first few days with *World of Warplanes* marveling at that achievement. Then, as the pace of unlocks slowed and the grind began, I realized what was missing: a competitive game that invites teamwork and tactical depth. Wargaming.net achieved air superiority, but wars are not solely won in the air.

Warplanes is at its best during the early stages. You start with a hangar full of Tier 1 aircraft, meaning the kinds of biplanes that were cutting-edge in the late 1920s and early '30s. Accruing XP in each aircraft, you can hoard those points for purchasing the next plane in the tech tree (all the way up to advanced jet-fighters at Tier IX) or spend them on upgrades for your existing plane.

Once a plane is maxed out, it earns elite status, meaning that all XP earned in that aircraft can be turned into "free XP" that you can spend on anything...for a price. So because I was an absolute killer with the German Arado 65 and the Japanese A5M (the precursor to the Zero), I continued flying those even after unlocking much better aircraft, and used a small amount of premium currency to make their experience available across every tech tree.

I also flew those aircraft because they remained a fun and distinct experience even after I had access to higher-level planes. The Tier 1 biplanes are slow, fragile and absurdly maneuverable. They are pure dogfighters, and a completely different experience from their successors, which are more about managing speed in the midst of the chaos. It's to *Warplanes*' credit that the game never turns into an XP chase for the next great airplane, but instead has a different flavor for aircraft of each era.

But if you want to have a wide variety of aircraft across the different tiers, prepare to cough up some cash. Even the $80 package of 6,000 gold will only buy you room for 20 or so aircraft, and that won't save you any time on the grind. While I'm not sure I'd ever need more than 20 aircraft on-hand, it definitely feels like getting the full *World of Warplanes* experience costs an eye-watering amount of time and money. Especially when you consider the astronomical costs of more advanced aircraft and upgrades.

Missing-man formation

I'm also not sure the investment of either is that richly rewarded. The selection can be a bit odd and redundant. Every air combat enthusiast has a "dream team" of aircraft, and a lot of those are missing here at *World of Warplanes*' launch. The German Focke-Wulf 190, for instance, is easily the second or third most iconic Luftwaffe aircraft of the war, but it's nowhere to be found in *Warplanes*' hangar. Neither is the RAF's Hurricane, nor the American P-47 Thunderbolt.

These are huge gaps and, more importantly, lead to a lot of unexciting upgrades among the mid-tier aircraft. While model revisions matter, it's hard to get excited as you work your way to the third variation of the P-51 Mustang in a row. Too often, these variants feel like filler ▸

Pilot speak

One of these quotes is real aviator slang, but which?

A

"Tell the chief I've got a warm fuzzy about this hop, and a big chicken dinner won't be necessary when I dirty at the bingo field."

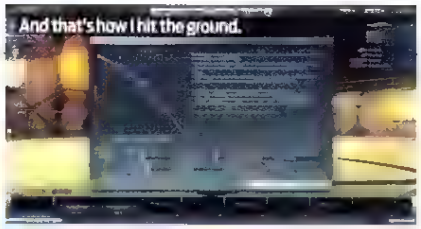
B

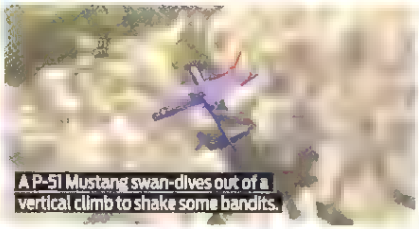
"I'm finishing the royal pony show, about to reverse-fist a belligerent postman on a two-pin slug tickler. See you at the Blarney stone."

Real quote: A
Translation: "Tell the commander I'm confident about completing this mission and I won't end up with a bad conduct discharge when I land back at base."

It feels shockingly natural with mouse and keyboard.

These guys tried to destroy our base to win the game. They're about to die.

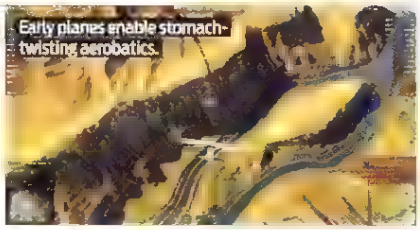

And that's how I hit the ground.

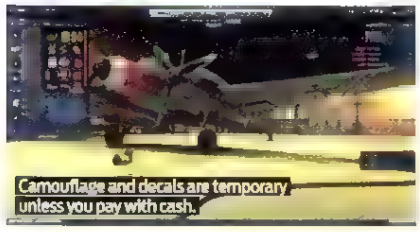

A P-51 Mustang swan-dives out of a vertical climb to shake some bandits.

Smoke doesn't just signal damage, but serious mechanical problems.

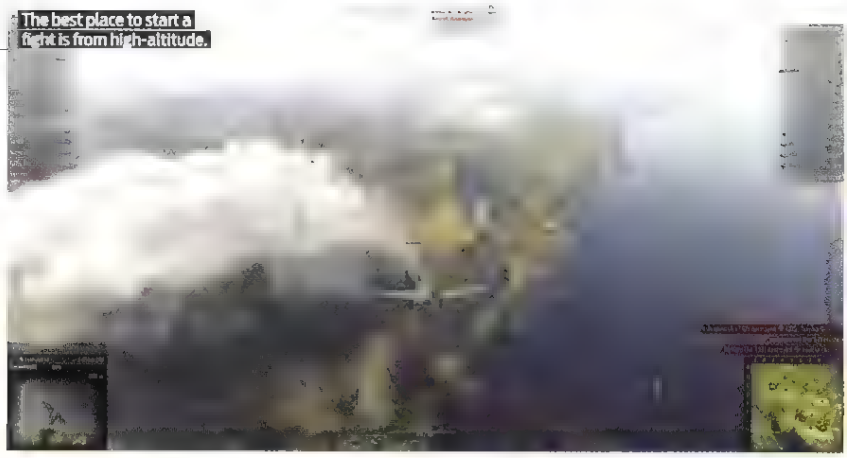
Sometimes *World of Warplanes* is just breathtakingly gorgeous.

You can't win 'em all.


Early planes enable stomach-twisting aerobatics.


Camouflage and decals are temporary unless you pay with cash.

Future's so bright...


The best place to start a fight is from high-altitude.

Eat it, Snoopy.

Some of the most gorgeous clouds in any flight game.

Just like shooting womp rats in Beggar's Canyon.

The draw-distance is immense.

Treetop-level is unkind to ground textures.

Not the sight you want to see if you're flying a heavy Sturmovik.

as players wait for the missing stars of WWII combat aviation to make their appearance.

It's also in this stage when the fundamental simplicity of *World of Warplanes* begins to feel like shallowness. To an extent, this is not Wargaming.net's fault. *Warplanes* is a game about dogfighting, which basically means that two teams fly at each other, and then all hell breaks loose. Despite the diversity of the visually spectacular maps—battles take place above a desert lake, a Pacific atoll, an Arctic peninsula the fact remains that there's no terrain at 18,000 feet in the air. There's no space for team tactics because everyone is just twisting and turning through the battle, making split-second decisions and then getting swept away again by momentum. The games themselves last only a few minutes before one team or the other is completely shot out of the sky.

Wargaming.net has attempted to add an action RTS element, but it's not very developed. Teams can theoretically win games by getting supremacy (destroying enough ground targets to win the game). So heavy attack planes can always go off on strafing and bombing runs against enemy ground installations and, if enough of those are destroyed, their team wins.

But theory and practice are miles apart on this. Aircraft engaging ground targets are easy prey for their high-flying cousins, and ground targets soak up so much punishment that once the bomb supply is exhausted, strafing runs are more erosive than destructive. In the meantime, those aircraft wasting time on ground targets are sorely missed in the skies above as their outnumbered teammates get rolled up. In the 150 plus games I've played so far, I can count the number of "supremacy victories" I've seen on the fingers of one hand.

Killing Bernoulli

The mouse and keyboard controls also begin to show their limitations as the aircraft get faster. When you're flying slow, agile Tier 1 aircraft, you can pull of a lot of small movements and tight, twisting turns. Not too hard with a mouse. But when you're trying to stay with a BF-109 while turning out of a 350mph dive, suddenly that joystick gathering dust in the corner looks a lot more inviting. While there are more advanced options you can enable that make the planes behave a lot more like actual planes, tuning the mouse controls and fiddling with automatic stabilizing settings takes a lot of trial and error to find a good balance. I have yet to find a group of settings that makes a barrel roll as natural and effortless as it is in a proper flight sim. It's the irony of accessibility: the basics get so basic that intermediate techniques end up being much harder.

Still, mouse and keyboard are the way to go. To its credit, *Warplanes* offers great support for advanced flight sticks such as my Saitek X52. The problem is that it's not really the tool for Wargaming.net's simplified flight model. Because *Warplanes* completely separates pitch, roll, and yaw from one another, it becomes almost impossible to execute even a simple banked turn without applying vast amounts of rudder. It is also manifestly not the way planes work, to the point where it breaks from reality so completely that it introduces its own dissonance.

Still, *World of Warplanes* doesn't really need to have brilliant, convincing controls. It succeeds at what it sets out to do: to make fast-paced air combat easy, accessible, and fun for a large audience. It brings to life the chaos and excitement of a huge aerial furball, of aircraft diving and twisting through rivers of tracer fire and dense clouds, black smoke belching from their engines as they battle to avoid collisions at the last possible second.

Warplanes also manages to make the chase for achievements fun and meaningful, even though the stat tracking itself is nowhere near as detailed as it should be. Winning an "ace medal" by racking up five kills in a single mission is a tremendous achievement, and running up the kill count on the "sky scourge" medal—a kill-streak tracker across several games for as long as you can continue to avoid being shot down—turns *World of Warplanes* into a tense score chase where death suddenly has consequence.

I'm not sure *Warplanes* will ever become an obsession the way some competitive free-to-play games do. Even here at the end of my review, I can feel my interest in it starting to wane. It's still something I will likely jump into at odd moments, when I only have a few minutes to play a game and feel like some quick action. But on those terms, it succeeds brilliantly. In time, perhaps new game modes and aircraft types will make it more diverse and interesting, but for now, *World of Warplanes* is everything it needs to be: a fast, accessible air combat game with no flight-sim baggage to bring you down. ■

Boasting lovely graphics and great matchmaking, *World of Warplanes* remains entertaining even as its simplicity wears thin.

PC GAMER 74

◆ **Expect to pay** Free to play ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Developer** Wargaming.net ◆ **Publisher** Wargaming.net ◆ **Multiplayer** Massive y ◆ **Link** www.worldofwarplanes.com

Ramming speed

A crash course in kamikaze air-combat

If there is a scourge of the air in *World of Warplanes*, it is the rammers. They are ubiquitous and you will be both one of them and one of their innocent victims. But like high-seas piracy it does work along some guidelines.

1 Heavies can't turn
The more maneuverable aircraft is the one that controls the collision. If you're going head-to-head, know which one you're flying.

2 Do not cross a man with nothing to lose
Like Max Payne, the guy with nothing left to live for is not going to swerve from his suicide run. A plane with no health is a kamikaze plane.

3 Don't go head-on
It's a DPS crap shoot who wins these fights. Instead, gain some altitude, then make a diving, oblique approach. It's not a lot of damage, but it's free damage.

> **It is manifestly not the way that planes work.**

COP OUT

A dull cop campaign undoes all that **NEED FOR SPEED RIVALS** does well *by Nathan Brown*

Need to know

What is it?
An open world racer with realistic graphics and impossibly varied scenery

Influenced by
Burnout Paradise, Need for Speed: Hot Pursuit

Play it on
2.4GHz CPU, 8GB RAM, Radeon 7850 or similar

Alternatively
Need for Speed: Hot Pursuit 78%

Copy protection
Origin

Next-generation consoles should be good news for PC owners: the increased processing power of the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One should, surely, mean the end of gimped console ports. Yet here we are, at the start of a new generation of console hardware, and one of the first big multiplatform games is capped at a miserly 30fps.

The PC being the PC, that framerate was unlocked within about five seconds of *Need for Speed Rivals* appearing on Origin, but the game engine itself is also locked at 30fps: double the framerate, and you double the speed of everything in the game. That's also been fixed, but if *Rivals* should dip below 60fps, your car slows down proportionally. On my rig I struggled to get above 45fps at max settings, making it impossible to outrun the police. I could have dialed down a few settings, but I didn't want to. *Need for Speed Rivals* might be a silly console port, but it sure is pretty.

As in EA's own *Battlefield 4*, and a host of other next-gen console launch games, much of that beauty comes from particle effects. *Rivals*' setting, the sprawling open world of Redview County, packs in a thoroughly unrealistic amount of environmental and climatic variety, giving developer Ghost Games license to fling a constant cloud of *something* at you. Leaves flutter on the breeze in the verdant green Pacific Woods. Snowflakes do likewise as you drive up the twisting mountain road in the northern Grand Peak Drive. Misjudge a corner in the parched southern desert of Dead Tree Canyon and little clouds of dust kick up beneath your tires. And when you scrape or bump into another car, sparks fly.

Scene stealing

When the environment doesn't naturally provide a particle shower, Ghost creates one. The game's storms are remarkable, the sky darkening and the rain lashing down, the road glimmering wet, the camera lens splattered with droplets. Your surroundings—whether the lay of the land or the weather system above it—change so frequently and so quickly that the readiest comparison is the wonderful *OutRun 2*. When you drift side-on to the camera around a sweeping bend in a sky-blue Ferrari, it's like you're in a parallel universe where Sega still makes beautiful racing games.

As far as the action goes, *Rivals* is best thought of as a combination of Criterion's *Burnout Paradise* and its first *Need for Speed* game, 2010's *Hot Pursuit*—and little wonder, given that 80 percent of the studio now works at Ghost Games. Like Paradise City, Redview is full of races, time trials and other events, but it's peppered with distractions too. Ramps are marked on the map and prove hard to ignore, especially when a dotted line shows the arc of another driver's jump. There are speed cameras and speed zones—stretches of road that measure your average velocity—and there's a leaderboard for all of them, forever teasing you with the better time, faster pace, or longer jump set by that one guy on your friends list—or, for the first time in the series, someone else in the world with you. AllDrive, the latest addition to EA's ever-expanding lexicon of smushed-together buzzwords, means you share Redview's 100-mile road network, seamlessly, with other human players.

Racer relations

Hot Pursuit's legacy, meanwhile, comes from two distinct careers, one each for racers and cops, each with its own leveling path and compendium of unlockable cars. Unlike Criterion's 2010 game, however, this time the street racers have access to the same Pursuit Tech toyset as the police, from EMP blasts and electrical forcefields to deployable spike strips and huge bursts of turbo. A few are only available to the cops—a helicopter which flies off ahead and drops spike strips, a roadblock which never, ever works—but their availability makes playing as a racer more interesting, albeit to the detriment of the police career.

That's something of a theme. The balance is further tipped in the racer's favor by Speed Points (SP), the game's principal currency, which, ▸

> **"You share the road, seamlessly, with other players."**

The gadget show

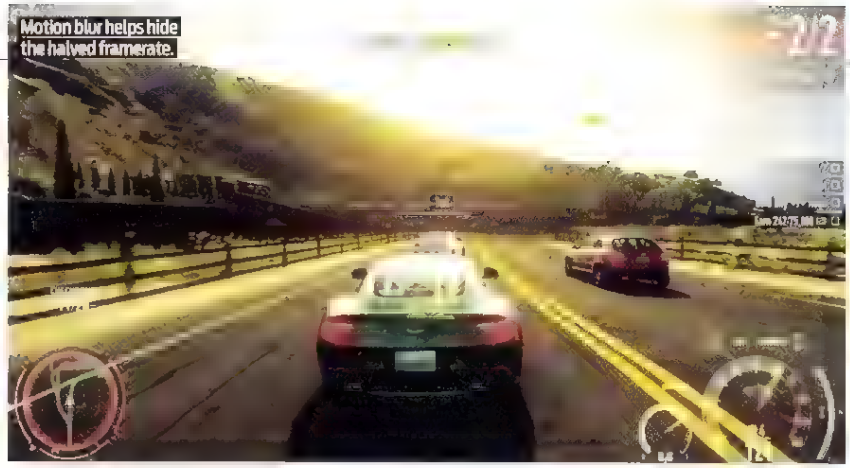
Fantasy technology on the road

Electrostatic field
Surrounds you in protective fizzing blue sparks.

Shock wave
A sonic area-of-effect attack. Equally implausible.

Turbo
A huge speed boost that invariably ends with you crashing.

Stun mine
Drop this behind you to take out pursuing vehicles.


Motion blur helps hide the halved framerate.

There's some obvious rubberbanding at times.

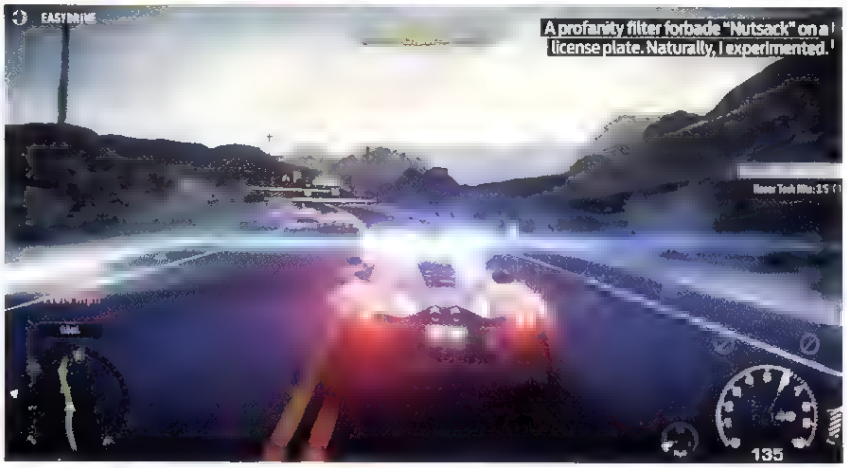
Prepare to be spammed with bad Origin IDs.

If it can be imagined, it is a particle effect in Rivals.
CHECKPOINT
0/1
4.0 mi.
F CJAMER

At death's door, the corners of the screen crack and darken.

I'll never catch him in this thing.

I don't think we're supposed to see that texture.

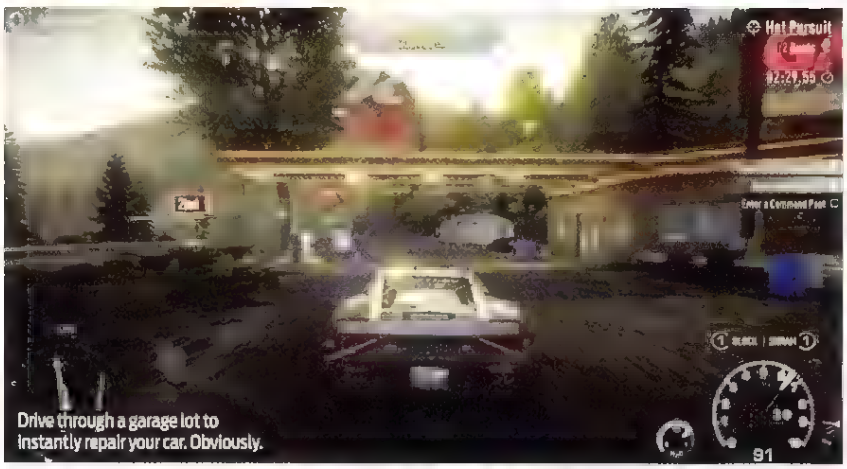

EASY DRIVE
A profanity filter forbade "Nutsack" on a license plate. Naturally, I experimented.
135

Getting hit by Pursuit Tech is really quite off-putting.

Cars take a good few hits to shut down. I miss Burnout's one-hit takedowns.
Hot Pursuit
2nd
1st
128

So, to recap: nutsack bad; ballbag good. Words to live by.

I couldn't have "scrotum" either.


Hot Pursuit
Drive through a garage lot to instantly repair your car. Obviously.
91

There's a storm comin'.
CHECKPOINT
SPEED CAMERA
POS 2/4
01:14.44
Perfect Turbos: 1/2
CHECKPOINT 6/20
5.2 mi
A Cop has left the Pursuit
119

as a racer, you spend on new cars and upgrades to existing ones. It's doled out as a reward for just about everything you get up to in Redview, whether it's a long drift around a sweeping bend, a near miss while weaving through traffic, a shunt to the rear bumper of a rival speedster, or the use of a full stock of nitrous turbo. As a cop, you build Speed Points indefinitely (and have little to spend them on) but as a racer, you have to bank them at one of the Hideouts that pepper the map.

A multiplier builds up the longer you stay out on the road, exponentially increasing your stock of SP, but as long as you do so you attract more and more police attention. Wreck your car, or get busted, and you lose the lot.

It's a delightful balance of risk and reward, and there's nothing quite like it as you speed down a stretch of road in a Head to Head with a fellow racer, weaving in and out of a helicopter searchlight while four police cars chase after you, smoke pouring out of your battered bonnet while you wrestle with a burst tire and desperately look out for a repair garage or Hideout. Suddenly the nearest comparison isn't *Burnout Paradise*, *Hot Pursuit*, or even *OutRun 2*, but *Dark Souls*. The relief when you bank a couple of hundred thousand SP is almost palpable, the sense of award enormous when you immediately blow the lot on vehicle upgrades and new Pursuit Tech toys. It's wonderful, breathless stuff.

The fuzz

Sadly, it's only half the game. The police career has no such element of risk and reward; Speed Points are, pardon the pun, all but pointless since you're given cars for free and they can't be upgraded. The cop path has its moments: chasing down a trio of street racers one by one is a thrill, but that was in *Hot Pursuit* three years ago at double the framerate, and given the delights on offer elsewhere you're constantly aware of what you're missing out on. It's telling that one of the cop campaign's finer moments comes when you go rogue and are tasked with taking down 10 racers from behind the wheel of a flame red Ferrari. You're a racer in all but name.

Worse still is the way Ghost has structured things—and once again there's a buzzword for it. You're given a handful of objectives at a time, dubbed a Speedlist: get Gold in a race, earn a set number of SP, and hit halt a dozen cars with Pursuit Tech, for instance. When you've done all that's been asked of you, a new objective appears telling you to return to a Hideout (or Command Post, when you're a cop) to bank your winnings, level up, unlock a new car, and pick up a new to-do list. Fair enough if you're police—you're there to follow orders, and there's no detriment to doing so—but for the racer campaign it's a different matter. You're actively instructed to avoid the best part of the game, which is staying out for as long as you can, building up that multiplier, racking up that score.

AI Drive, too, has been fudged. While Redview County's sprawl is packed with other racers and cops, the vast majority are controlled by the AI. Just five other human players share those 100 miles of open road with you, and encounters with them are rare. You can set a waypoint to track them, unless the police are after you—as a live online game, this has no pause menu: a map overlay pops up while the action continues behind it. And you can always invite a friend to join you, but that rather defeats the object of a seamless multiplayer world. It's not Ghost's fault that people are griefers—one all-too-rare spate of missions with a random partner ended with him switching from racer to cop and shunting me off the side of a cliff—but the studio most certainly is to blame for networking issues. Host migrations are common, and I frequently found that when the action resumed I'd slipped a position or two in a race, or been booted out of it entirely.

Near miss

It's a tremendous shame because at *Rivals*' core lies a beautiful racing game. The vehicle handling is the right mixture of weighty and floaty, the merest tap on the brakes as you enter a corner is enough to push your back end out into an extravagant drift. The game is staggeringly pretty at times, too, its world designed with a photographer's eye that ensures there's a spectacular vista waiting for you around every sweeping bend.

But it's let down by some baffling design decisions. A multiplayer structure that doesn't work. A dull cop campaign that dilutes the frantic, tense splendor of the racer's. And that locked framerate.

Need for Speed Rivals runs at half the speed it ought to and, thanks to the police stuff, is half the game it could have been, too. It's not only next-gen consoles that have held *Rivals* back: it's the developer's inability to recognize, and focus on, the things that really work. ■

One good idea—the racer's scoring system—spoiled by a thuddingly dull cop campaign and dumb design decisions

PC GAMER 71

◆ **Expect to pay** $60 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Developer** Ghost Games ◆ **Publisher** EA
◆ **Multiplayer** Up to six players ◆ **Link** www.needforspeed.com

Overlay! Overlay!

Need for Speed Rivals' busy HUD explained

1 **Easydrive** A quick me[nu] act vated by taking a thumb off the st ck, and onto the D pad. Prepare to crash.

2 **Speedwall** Shows the fastest time, longest jumps and other depr[ecated] mat on

3 **Minimap** Put[s] the [full] minimap [over] the [race]

4 **Nitrous** B[u]ild turbo with drifts, near misses and driving on the wrong side of the road

5 **Speedlist** Current objective Comp[lete] them [for] XP

The nearest comparison isn't *Burnout Paradise* but *Dark Souls*.

A paladin, mage, and a cleric walk into a bar.

The Light-Grey Pits would sound less threatening.

Hours of adventure await in that one square.

Hexxat's quest adds more surprises to the graveyard.

Public magic is banned, but try telling the wild mage.

AMN, SON

Can **BALDUR'S GATE 2: ENHANCED EDITION** roll a critical hit? *by Phil Savage*

Need to know

What is it?
An expanded and polished version of *BG II: Shadows of Amn* and *Throne of Bhaal*

Influenced by
Dungeons & Dragons, the fun bits of *Baldur's Gate I*

Play it on
1GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, OpenGL 2.0 compatible GPU

Alternatively
Dragon Age: Origins 94%

Copy protection
Beamdog Account or Steam

Beamdog's first *Baldur's Gate* overhaul felt as if it lacked the confidence to fully expand on BioWare's work. This is more assured, and a better package because of it. The systemic changes are still minor, providing few improvements to an aging interface, but new characters and expanded quests offer a great excuse for fans to revisit the mercantile nation of Amn.

It helps that this reworking is built on a much stronger foundation. *Baldur's Gate II* was the highpoint of BioWare's early work, and the proving ground for ideas that can still be seen in its later games. The party dynamics, strange sidequests, romantic sub-plots, and subtle intrigues create a character-driven story that remains compelling throughout its 100+ hours.

The structure feels much more liberating than *BG1*. After a grueling first chapter escape from an evil wizard's prison, you and your returning followers emerge into the city of Athkatla. Your goal is to rescue your childhood friend Imoen, but doing so requires money, and the support of a powerful guild.

In practical terms, it's a guilt-free excuse to explore the giant city and surrounding area, taking on quests that would seem trite in a more urgent scenario. If a mission can increase your wealth or influence, pursuing it is justifiable. Now feel free to explore the enchanted circus or rescue a ghost's teddy bear.

The most welcome change is in how party members are recruited. Unlike *BG1*, there is no longer a reliance on set pairs of followers. Khalid and Dynaheir are conveniently killed off, leaving the returning Jaheira and Minsc as free agents. Not only does this give more flexibility to party composition, it means the *Enhanced Edition*'s new companions are more viable.

Neera, Rasaad, and Dorn return, each now attached to their own extended, multi-part quests. Once again they fit naturally into the proceedings, such that new players would barely notice they weren't part of the original release. Despite that, their subclass specializations create a tactical diversity that should prove welcome to returning veterans.

But it's *BG2:EE*'s new character who steals the show. Hexxat is a neutral-evil thief who, after the completion of her opening quest, reveals a unique set of game mechanics based around the time of day. In addition to this quirk, her interplay with older party members is consistently funny.

The interface changes—easier quicksave access and a "quick loot" system—are helpful but minor tweaks. The Black Pits arena returns, providing an enjoyable but lightweight excuse to play with the battle system. For purists, happy to let mods do the enhancing, there's no compelling reason to buy this. But for new players, or those looking for a fresh take on an old favorite, *Baldur's Gate 2: Enhanced Edition* is a worthy, albeit costly alternative. ■

VERDICT

Doesn't do enough to be the uncontested definitive version, but provides a fresh perspective on an exceptional RPG.

PC GAMER **84**

◆ **Expect to pay** $25 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Developer** Beamdog ◆ **Publisher** BioWare/Overhaul Games ◆ **Multiplayer** up to 6 ◆ **Link** www.baldursgate.com

RISKY CLICK

Battle on a procedurally generated alien planet in **RISK OF RAIN** *by Ben Griffin*

In this procedural sidescroller, you must battle a planet full of very territorial natives. You've got your work cut out. Leveling up is quick and power-ups plentiful, but when you die you're gone for good cash, rank, and items with you. While you'll see all 11 stages in a few sittings, restarting because you were killed by a sand crab near the end is always painful.

The longer you take, the tougher your enemies become, but that's OK because before long you're launching sawmerangs and homing missiles, stopping time, and freezing foes with snowglobes. In this game, you start as a baby and end as a badass.

These powers are randomly strewn across the battlefield, locked until you have the cash to claim them. Discovering their absurd forms and functions is *Risk of Rain*'s most satisfying hook.

Nary a second goes by where you're not gambling on shrines (spend money for a randomized prize), awakening drones (they back you up with rockets, lasers, and machineguns), or running really fast away from surprise things. It's just a shame only the furnishings are randomized and not the maps themselves, though ten playable characters do change how they feel.

You can't aim, so have to face the direction you shoot. Which means standing still and firing while foes approach, running away, then repeating. What saves this is the raw volume of on-screen action: the bullets, the plasma, the huge magma worm diving right for your face.

In the interest of accommodating it all, both the awful maximum resolution and the tiny sprites are just about excused. ■

PC GAMER **72**

◆ **Expect to pay** $ 0 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Developer** Hopoo Game
◆ **Publisher** Hopoo Games ◆ **Multiplayer** Up to 4 ◆ **Link** riskofrain.gamepedia.com

gamesradar
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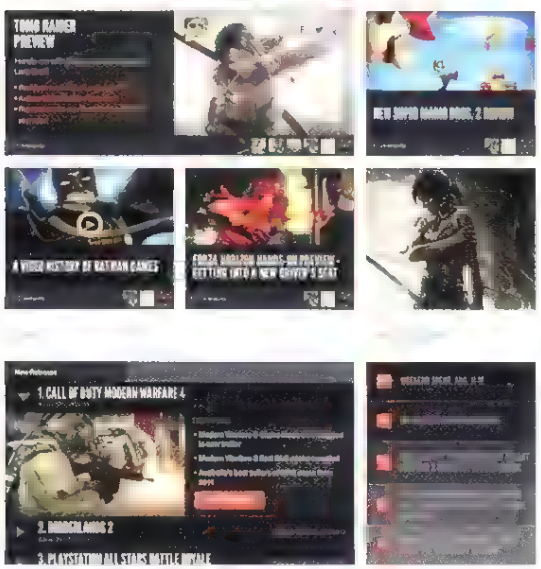


CREATIVE BLOCK

LEGO MARVEL SUPER HEROES is a brick-for-brick replica of its predecessors *by Robert Hathorne*

Need to know

What is it?
An action-platformer in a Marvel universe made of Lego bricks.

Influenced by
Ten other Lego games. *Grand Theft Auto*

Play it on
2GHz CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 9800GT/ Radeon HD 4850, gamepad

Alternatively
Marvel: Ultimate Alliance, 67%

Copy protection
Steam

Every *Lego* game has some yummy digital gravy to help ease the passing of an otherwise dull romp through undemanding challenges and headache-inducing camera work. For *Lego Marvel*, it's a huge cast of truly diverse characters.

The biggest delight isn't just how much of the Marvel roster has been squeezed into the game (more than 150 characters), but how different each character feels—so much so that it's easier to identify characters by skillset than character class. Thor and Iron Man, for example, both fly and fire energy projectiles, but their approaches to combat are unique.

Iron Man's attacks are generally ranged—launching missiles and energy beams to annihilate minifigs from afar. He only comes in close for finishing moves, such as a jet-powered charge to scoop an enemy off its feet followed by a midair tussle and a final slam into the pavement. By contrast, Thor keeps things up close, using his lightning powers to shock those around him while tossing his infinitely massive hammer like a boomerang to keep enemies at midrange in check.

The agile Spider-Man is my favorite to play. Leaping and swinging from wall to brawl, and lassoing baddies with webbing before whipping them into the nearest solid object, feels exactly as over-the-top as it should. But despite the fun, something kept nagging at me—a yawn.

Attack of the clones

No one's here to tell you that playing a character with adamantium claws isn't awesome—it is—but *Marvel* suffers from a disconnect between the coolness of its characters and the abysmal dullness of its mechanics. These are the exact same systems that have been present since the series' beginning. The same levers, hatches, and platforms to be pushed or pulled in every level, in every game, for ten years. To be fair, it all works just fine, but it's become so damned uninteresting. And I think Traveller's Tales know it.

If it didn't, there wouldn't be such a sugary crust of characters, voice actors, superb visuals, a monstrous quantity of collectables, and even an open-world hub full of side missions to sweeten the deal. But ultimately it's the mechanics that make a game memorable, and this is where *Marvel*—and the rest of the series—is woefully lacking.

The game-within-the-game of finding your character in *Lego Marvel*'s shifting co-op split-screens is maddening. When play begins, both characters are in a single, unbroken frame. When they get too far apart to fit on the same screen, a line magically splits the monitor vertically and play continues uninterrupted. But as players move around the arena, the screens move around the monitor with the characters. I can't count the times I looked up from my nachos to find my screen on the other side of the monitor with my character aimlessly careening into walls.

Marvel simply highlights an obviously stagnating formula. The collectables make it either a completionist's dream or nightmare, and puzzling out how to rescue Stan Lee in every level is a neat touch. I'm not calling for *Lego*'s extinction, but it certainly deserves an evolution. ■

> "It's easier to identify characters by skillset than character class."

The fantastic forms of Mister Fantastic

It's a bird, it's a plane, it's a...

Water pump!
That's what he calls it, anyway

Screwdriver!
Why not just use a screwdriver?

Rocket!
For flying to the Brick Moon

Wrecking ball!
Includes twerkable Lego Miley Cyrus

◆ **Expect to pay** $30 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Developer** Traveller's Tales ◆ **Publisher** Warner Bros ◆ **Multiplayer** Two player local co-op ◆ **Link** www.bit.ly/LegoMSH

VERDICT

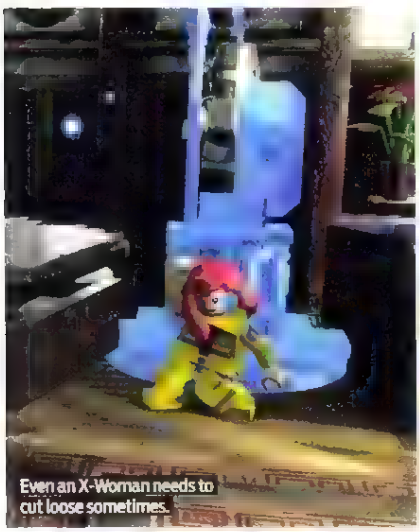
The huge selection of great characters is scrumptiously entertaining from start to finish. Too bad it's a *Lego* game.

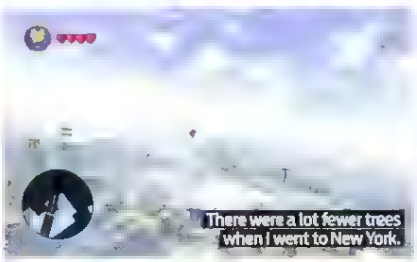
PC GAMER 60

Want to play "spot the difference?"

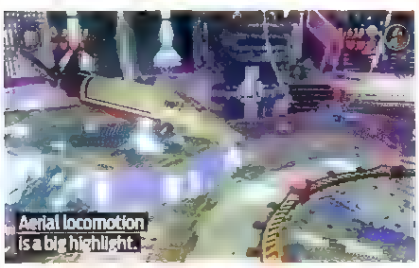
There's always time for tea time.

244,510
10.81
Grand Theft Lego, anyone?


Even an X-Woman needs to cut loose sometimes.


There were a lot fewer trees when I went to New York.

102,590
Thing: IT'S CLOBBERIN' TIME!!!
I get it! The pumpkin is a metaphor for Thing's childhood.


Aerial locomotion is a big highlight.

"Gross! A spider. Step on it!"

"We agreed nothing below the belt!"

Even Juggernaut has gotten into Zumba.

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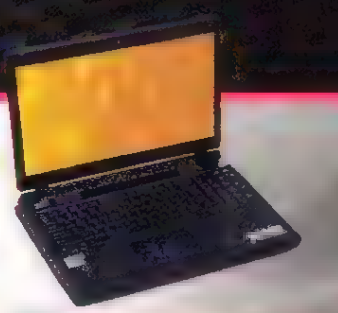

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NOW PLAYING

Never underestimate the appeal of rum, sodomy, and the lash.

Holy hell, that was a bit much. Let's do it again.

ASSASSIN'S CREED IV: BLACK FLAG

This month Thought about the nature of violence. Stabbed many people
Also Played *Dota 2* *XCOM: Enemy Within*, *Hearthstone*

Assassin's Creed is about stabbing people. It has tried to be a lot of things Dan Brown novel, naval combat simulator, tower defense game, Renaissance James Bond movie, but it's none of those though, really, it's a game about poking people with a pointy thing such that they clutch at themselves, fall, and go 'erk.'

The thing is, it's really *really* good at it. It's had its problems elsewhere, and it would love to be more than this, but *Assassin's Creed* has always been a spectacular realization of a very specific rather adolescent fantasy. There was a point early on in my time with *Black Flag* where I performed a sprinting assassination with Kenway's twin cutlasses equipped rather than his more traditional hidden blades. He sprinted up to a hapless Spanish guardsman with arms forward, thrusting both swords through his victim's sternum with such force that the Spaniard was lifted off the ground.

"Holy hell," I thought, a little taken aback by the violence. "That was a bit much. Let's do it again."

That moment established Kenway's character and the way I was going to play him. He's not Altair, jumping from crowds to kill with a single blow. He's not Ezio dancing from flamboyant takedown to flamboyant takedown. He's not Connor hiding forgettable patrees. He's a butcher with style, a lake-dwelling person who is redeemed only by the fact that he lived in a time and a place full of them. His fighting style is scrappy, violent and guileless, and that's how I feel when I'm rampaging across the high seas as him.

We live in a time when game violence is under increasing scrutiny. This is welcome: there are important questions to be asked about why almost every game presents conflict as a violent encounter, and why otherwise-peaceful people enjoy this kind of entertainment so much. But I suspect the answers to those questions go way beyond games' tendencies to notions of power and conquest that we're hard-wired to respond to.

I'm harmless in real life. I wouldn't hurt a fly. But there's something about swinging off a rope into a sword first flying kill, rolling into a clash of steel, kicking a man off a boat, then swaying another with a shot to the face that makes me cast about for someone to high five. It's a ridiculous, questionable feeling of joy and release. *Black Flag* has made me freshly aware of how human it is to want to roll around in your own id.

Previous games in the series balanced their violent content with a meticulous take on some of history's most ornate and beautiful places. Ezio's own flamboyance is a match for his time and place. In Kenway's case,

READ ME
RELEASED November 20[illegible]
OUR REVIEW February 20[illegible]
BUY IT Steam
MIND Watch Red Dw[illegible]

his p ace is the ro ng ocean often wh oped to a fury by the most technica..y impress ve s.mu ation of the power of nature I've seen in a game. And in the middle of all th s storm und drang as you angle the ship into the next breaching wave, you can hear Kenway's crew singing. A few bars of shanty has poetry to t when set against the fury of a storm, and it's a surprising and hearten ng thing to find in a game that is otherw se, as I've sa d about stabbing. There's art stry there, and at .east one of the dozen teams respons.ble for the game rea..y knows how to execute on a fantasy.

It's the game's most successful juxtaposition. Its other—17th century piracy versus, for some reason, 21st century off ce work—is a misstep, and confirmat on that Ubisoft's h gh concept br.nksmanship needs curta ling. The game seems to feel it needs Abstergo to be ab.e to say someth ng, but it doesn't. It's allowed to be a game about swordf ghting, about a violent era, about ships and shanties. Our imaginations can do the rest of the work to figure out why we still get something out of those experiences.

The only obstacle left was a metal panel held in by screws.

QUADRILATERAL COWBOY

This month Failed to hack into his own fridge. Starved to death
Also Played *DayZ*, *Battlefield 4*, *Just Cause 2 Multiplayer*

Playing Brendan Chung's he st game, *Quadrilateral Cowboy*, I've learned a lot. I've learned about sneak ng, 've .earned about hacking, and I've learned that tiny screws are the best way to protect sensitive bus ness nformation from thiev ng nd.str a hackers.

My m ssion was to hack into some data cables in a facility protected by laser grids. With on..y a minute to complete the mission, I needed to get in, get the data, and get out without a s ng.e moment of hesitation.

I opened my big yellow laptop and hacked a sky..ght to instruct it to br.efly open, and then added a line to disable the two .aser systems protecting my prize for three seconds each—any longer would trigger an alarm.

I gave myself 10 seconds to grab the data and programmed the .asers to disable again after that, to give me a way out.

I executed the command and slipped into the fac..ity. "Lasers? What lasers?" I said out loud as the .asers faded before me. Nobody heard me, but t felt good.

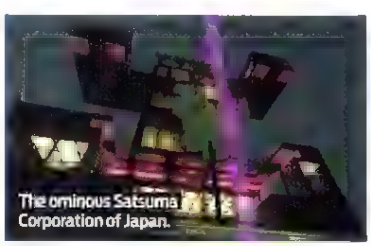
Then I had to uncover the cable and plug it into my laptop. The only obstacle left was one metal panel he..d in by two tiny screws. A.. I had to do was c.ick on them and they'd unscrew and fall to the floor.

Crap!" I said to nobody as I missed once, tw ce. I shoved my face into the panel to get closer to the screws. Got one! It toppled qu etly out of its ho.e. Got the other one!

The panel final..y fell away. . snatched the data and ran .nto a laser gr.d just as it reactivated. "Nyooo!" I said to the turret as it sl.d out of the ce..ng and shot me dead. Defeated by a screw. How embarrassing.

READ ME

RELEASED Not yet
OUR REVIEW Not yet
BUY IT Se.ious.y, not out yet
MORE www.brencogames.com/qc



This is not a game about running really fast.

MIRROR'S EDGE

BEN GRIFFIN

This month Styl shly traversed a v rtual world, tripped over his laces in rea. ife
Also Played
Call of Duty: Ghosts

There are two types of people in the world: those who love *Mirror's Edge* and those who don't. I have blocked every member of the latter camp on Tw tter. *Mirror's Edge* Haters (or 'MEH') fundamental.y m sunderstand DICE's 2008 free runner. "I keep losing momentum," they weep stupid.y. "Levels are confus ng and layouts action-halting," they weep further. In fact, MEH fundamenta.ly misunderstand free runn ng itse.f.

Their perception of parkour is rooted n YouTube highlight reels—compilat ons of the sickest stunts for kids with short attent on spans. In reality, the sport is as much about scouting routes and mentally mapping moves as execut ng them. *Mirror's Edge* is a free-running game in the purest sense, capturing both its brain and its brawn. Even now, on my f fth playthrough, I st ll rely on Runner Vis on—a v sual prompt that points my head towards the exit. But don't regard this as a des gn fa lure. Feeling out routes is part of parkour's process.

This is not a game about running really fast. I get an almost voyeuristic pleasure from simply occupy ng its metropolis. Exploring t gives me the fee. ng I'm do ng something socially deviant, i.l cit—like swimming in a city river or not wearing any underwear. Passing through some immacu.ate lobby, it's as if the secretary could burst in and catch me at any moment. The e.evator I'm riding might sudden.y open on a floor of gawp ng office clerks.

Apart from the government muscle, you don't encounter a soul outside of cutscenes, but their presence can be sniffed everywhere. a hurt ng train packed with s houettes, a janitor's marker-scrawled "diploma" on his office wall, the low humm ng conversational din seeping through walls. I get the same sensation play ng *Mirror's Edge* as I do being inside on a rainy day.

Time is split between interiors and exteriors. In the former, I'm a cornered rat evading catchers by scurry ng down air vents, c.imbing through. ft hatches, and c.awing up sheer walls. Crit cs lambast the mandatory chases and combat sections for nterrupt ng the casual pace, but I f nd them an exh larat ng counter-balance.

Outs de, I'm a Runner. Careening over stark white rooftops lined with orderly solar panels and electric fences, I hear nattering pedestrians and wailing s rens on the wind. Whereas ins.de people could stop me by simply cracking open a door, up here they're powerless. The c.oying and c.austrophobic gives way to the live.y and l berat ng—two qualities coupled together by the innate m schievousness of being somewhere that you sho.ldn't be. That, for me, s *Mirror's Edge*.

READ ME
RELEASED November 2008
OUR REVIEW March 2009
BUY IT
MORE www.mirrorsedge.com

Axe man slashes the air a few times, perhaps playfully.

DAYZ

This month Made friends with bad people, read Moby Dick front to back under a tree in Chernarus
Also Played *Counter-Strike: GO*

No part of this image is reassuring.

The first month was a precocious time for the *DayZ* mod. Searchable loot maps weren't an Alt-Tab away, hackers hadn't invaded the scene, and Chernarus was still a 225km² mystery.

I feel lucky then, to be playing the standalone version on the first night of its release. Well, relatively lucky: the *Arma* code that drives *DayZ* isn't giving me great performance. I'm stuck with 15 or 20fps as I spawn in the city of Elektrozavodsk. It's thick night, and I'm exploring through the narrow halo of my flashlight.

I peek in every apartment, derelict kitchen, shop, hospital, and church I pass, and come up with a pair of tennis shoes, a few soda cans, and a backpack. I put a rotten orange in the bag, unsure if I'll eat it, and hear an unmistakable sound: footsteps. I spin my flashlight, illuminating an olive-shirted guy with an axe.

"Friendly friendly, I don't have anything," I mutter instinctively, backpedaling. He slashes the air a few times, perhaps playfully, perhaps to intimidate, perhaps both. He says nothing and jogs away. I follow.

We breach a fence into a fire station, and axe man is immediately burying his hatchet in another player. "Whoa, whoa, he doesn't have anything." I plead. His victim is in a yellow windbreaker, jogging around "sstopw," brokeasshachi types over chat. The axe swings until his body crumples.

"I liked his raincoat," axe man mutters sprinting into the dark. brokeasshachi had plenty. I loot a hammer, some batteries, and handcuffs. I'm an accomplice to my first witnessed murder. It's good to be back.

READ ME

RELEASED December 2013 (early access)
OUR REVIEW N/A
BUY IT Steam
MORE www.dayzmod.com

My old ranger and his faithful hound.

Watching a distant battle. Not helping.

When he was gone, relief washed over me like a wave.

GUILD WARS 2

This month Deleted a character he'd invested 60 hours in because he didn't like his voice
Also Played *EVE Online*

My pet needs help!" "Refreshing!" "Eat my dust!" "I achieve things. I'm an achiever." "*That's* how it's done." I know these lines by heart because, in the 60 hours I spent with my human ranger in *Guild Wars 2*, I must have heard them six hundred thousand million times. It could have been more. It feels like more.

I've got nothing against Nolan North. He's in too many games, and mostly plays the same character but he's great as Nathan Drake in the *Uncharted* series and *Portal 2*'s Space Sphere. The difference in those games, though, is that he has more than 10 lines of dialogue, and he's not continually repeating them over the course of a game that could span hundreds of hours.

So I deleted my ranger. He was touching level 50—the highest I've ever leveled a *Guild Wars 2* character—but I just couldn't deal with the dialogue any more. I didn't have to *delete* him, but I wanted to. When he was gone, relief washed over me like a wave.

Whenever another human activates Swiftness near my new character, and I hear North's "Eat my dust!" it still cuts through my soul. I'm playing as a Norn now, whose baritone voice is less annoying, but I'm already sick of hearing him say "Such might." Maybe Nolan North isn't to blame, after all.

READ ME

RELEASED Out now
OUR REVIEW November
BUY IT
MORE www.guildwars.com

1 GEORGE ROMERO MOD

Contributing to the constantly raging debate over whether zombies should be fast or slow, *State of Decay* confidently declared "er, why not both?" But there's no need for you to be as noncommittal, thanks to the options enabled by the *George Romero Mod*.

As the name might suggest, it was designed to add slower, tougher, more dangerous zombies. Now, thanks to rapid development, it offers a selection of optional behaviors to tailor your undead experience instantly. "Classic Dread Mode," and you get slowly shambling zombies that can put you in a critical state with a single bite. To compensate for their reduced speed, detection is increased, meaning flashlights and gunshots will tempt out more zombies than in the vanilla version. The safety afforded by carsis mearly nerfed. Dread mode makes them significantly weaker, and likely to catch fire after only a few direct hits.

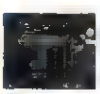
Beyond these pre-packaged tweaks, *George Romero Mod* offers a full catalog of mix-and-match possibilities. Instead of slow zombies, you can set the game to include only fast ones. If you'd prefer something a bit more slapstick, you can disable vehicle damage altogether. You can increase the zombie population—and then use a second install to increase it even further. In addition to these systemic changes, you can enable aesthetic ones. Felci vision—named after Italian film director Lucio Fulci—removes the onscreen red tint that covers death, giving you a close-up view of a fatal zombie attack. *GRM*'s latest update brings the ominous sounding Hell Mode. Unlike Dread Mode, which artificially ups *SoD*'s difficulty through various tweaks, Hell Mode simply makes attacks fatal and spawns vehicles that are exceptionally weak. The trade-off is that weapons are more durable, so you spend more time out in the open, walking to places. If *State of Decay* doesn't deliver exactly the zombie game you want, *George Romero* can help. **PS**

"And yet, still no hopping *Minecraft* zombies."

2 XCOM: ENEMY WITHIN

Don't just modify your soldiers. With these four tweaks to *XCOM*'s excellent expansion, you can augment your game as well. **PS**

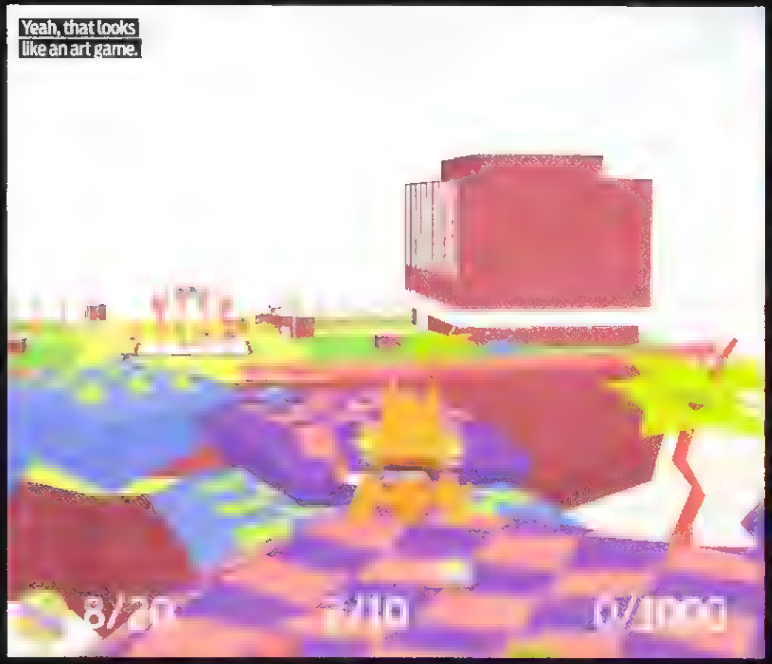
MELD MECHANICS REWORKED
Preferred old-style play? This mod will disable meld canisters, drawing meld from aliens and artifacts.



REVENGE OF THE SLEEVES
Reverts modded soldiers' armor, keeping the new class logos but covering up their arms. It gets chilly out there.

UBER MOD
Take the difficulty out of running an internationally sponsored last line of defense. Increases resources and cuts build times.

SECOND WAVE UNLOCKED
If you'd rather have all the rule modifications upfront, this mod grants instant access to every option.



3 BUBSY 3D

WEBGAME A COMING-OF-AGE TALE ABOUT ART AND TALKING CATS

Don't worry, Bubsy—the '90s gaming C-lister—isn't about to make a comeback. *Bubsy 3D: Bubsy Visits the James Turrell Retrospective* is a weird art-platformer by *Zenith* creators Arcane Kids.

It's a punk-edutainment game, in which the titular cat-thing takes a trip to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Using a deliberately awkward control scheme, you jump and glide your way across floating platforms, making your way towards the museum and receiving hints from frogs.

Once there, you'll explore the installations of experimental artist James Turrell, following a trail of collectibles as Bubsy ruminates on the nature of light and art. Soon after this, things get weird. Er, even weirder than they were before. **PS**

www.bubsy3d.com

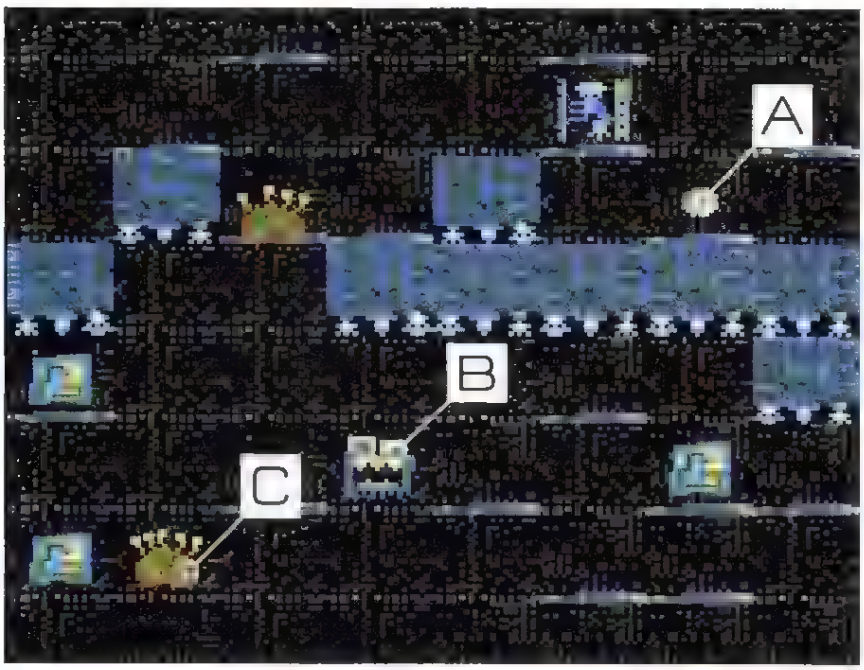
4 POST-FUTURE VAGABOND

Michael "Smestorp" Brough continues his adventures in lo-fi puzzling but unlike *Corrypt* and *868 Hack* this is closer to a shmup. It's slow pace aside, positioning, movement and reaction are key. Learning is also important as much of the difficulty arises from lack of explanation. Here are three pointers. **PS**

A Z-LASER ORBS Attacks fire out in the four cardinal directions. You can only hold three charges, so restock by using these orbs.

B GHOSTS Will periodically spawn into the arena. They can move through walls, which means they will constantly follow you until killed.

C BACTERIA Kill these to progress to the next level. The number of eyes represents how many hits remain before they die.

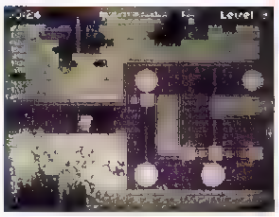


5 THE VERY ORGANIZED THIEF

Your are spawned in a house that is not your own, carrying nothing but a flashlight and a list of items. If you hadn't guessed, your job is to steal things. Both the larcenous list and the location of its items are randomly generated each time you play, which means you'll need to carefully explore the house to find what you're after.

In most cases, it's easy to intuit where the items will be. A blender, for instance, will reliably live in the kitchen. Others are more cryptic, like the gold bar that you're always asked to find. To aid you in your search, you can pick up items, open draws, and lift lids. You may be organized, but nothing says you have to be tidy.

More involved interactions also exist, such as cutting power to the house. Of course, if the building is abandoned why would you bother? Because eventually, the owner will come home. **PS**



6 PAUSE AHEAD

Here's a novel idea: a 2D puzzle platformer with a time-bending twist. OK, so *Pause Ahead* might not be original in concept, but it's proficient in execution. You must make your way through the difficult trap-filled levels, completing them within the time limit despite a control scheme that seems unsuited to twitch acrobatics. It works because with a tap of the Shift key you freeze time, unable to course-correct but keeping your momentum.

That means you can run towards a buzzsaw, freeze time, and skid right past. As long as time's not moving, you'll pass through the danger unharmed. Hit a wall, however, and you lose your speed. If you're hovering over an obstacle when you resume, you'll be instantly killed.

The actions you need to make to progress soon become more manic, requiring you to quickly switch between frozen and unfrozen states, course correcting to make minute adjustments in direction while hoping you've done enough to let momentum carry you to safety. It's sometimes frustrating, but *Pause Ahead* produces a satisfying thrill when mastered. **PS**

7 FAERUN

What started as an individual scenario has ballooned into a D&D themed total conversion for *Civilization V*'s main campaign. *Faerun* is a huge mod that completely reworks the majority of its base game's systems and rules.

It's a dedicated love letter to D&D, offering fans 25 leaders to command, each with the appropriate cities, units, bonuses and morality alignment. And if you're less enamored with the fiction, you should at least appreciate the fact that you can hunt and attack dragons for huge gold bonuses.

While fantasy barbarians make for more dangerous exploration, you've a number of new features to help. Culture is now Weave, and it can be spent on learning spells. Depending on which schools you pick, these can provide buffs to your empire, or boost the offensive capabilities of new Heroes (special units chosen from a limited pool, which grow in power over the campaign).

PHIL SAYS...
"Chaotic evil? Sure, I'll trust this peace treaty."

The other reworked screen is the research tree, which is shorter in length, but far broader. Incorporating new magic buildings and units. It even lets you research special branches tied to your character's alignment. *Faerun* is an enjoyable clash of D&D's rich lore against Firaxis's deep strategy. **PS**

8 CHATTERER

HOUSTON, WE HAVE A KERBAL

Chatterer modestly describes itself as "totally useless." While it's true that it doesn't add any new parts or features, it increases the authenticity of *Kerbal Space Program*, making it one of the few essential mods that doesn't affect how you'll play.

It uses radio chatter pulled from Apollo 11, STS-1 and the Soviet space missions, and remixes the audio to create a nonsensical Kerbal equivalent of Simlish. These speech files are played during missions, creating the illusion that your astronauts are talking to home base.

A new UI box lets you set the timing window for radio calls, and toggle a "beep" noise for your ship to periodically emit. Download the authentic Apollo 11 "Quindar" tones from the audio file on their Wikipedia page (*www.bit.ly/Quindar*) for a dramatically atmospheric experience of long space-flights.

If realism isn't your aim, you can also get the optional "Soundscape" files for the latest beta release. They play occasional ambient synths, evoking hard sci-fi films of the '60s and '70s. **PS**

www.bit.ly/KSPChat

PORTAL 2

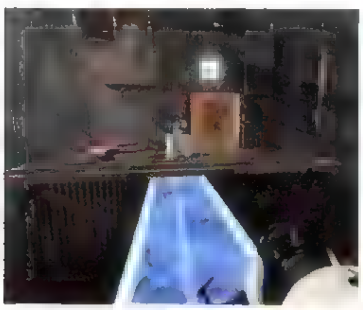
Valve's *Portal 2* map repository recently passed 300 000 uploads, making the game's fans by far the most active of Steam's creative community.

With so many new maps available, standing out and getting noticed becomes a problem. To be recognized in the throng of thumbnails requires a commitment to excellence. There's no easy solution, but these helps to do something new, creating features that allow for previously unimagined puzzles, twisting *Portal*'s engine in strange and wonderful ways, or authoring a strong series of challenges around an interesting theme.

From the hundreds of thousands of choices, here are three that fit that brief and are worthy of your time. **PS**

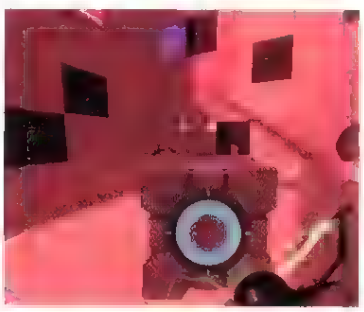
PENROSE

This series of maps makes use of non-Euclidean space to create a collection of puzzles that incorporate *The Stanley Parable*-style elevator twisting and exploration. Aperture gates creates what are essentially giant portals. Entering these however. All subtly alter the maps themselves in ways that make them tricky to navigate. It's a refreshing, new approach to puzzling in the game that'll expect to [illegible] through. But with time and experimentation you'll start to pick apart the developer's designs.



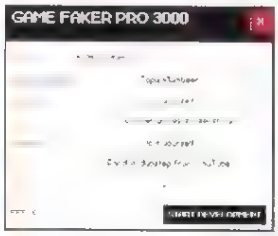
DIVERSITY MAP PACK

The first part of this collection of levels introduces the Scaffold and Propulsion Gel so subtly and elegantly that it feels like it belongs in the main game. Soon fields of [illegible] physics-based puzzles like Excursion Funnels and Crazy Portals through them. A series of clever puzzles throughout explore the possibilities, and reveal the difficulty hardcore portal-flowing variations on familiar systems.



SHIFT

Forget subtlety and restraint. *Shift* adds an alternate dimension. A button transports you between two variations of a single map, each containing all the puzzle elements you're transported between objects you have to find ways to bridge the divide yourself. Initially that means [illegible] but things become more complicated when switches on one side activate devices on the other.



VLAMBEER CLONE TYCOON

Super Crate Box developer Vlambeer has had a difficult time with people copying its games. Clones have been made of not just the indie duo's arcade box-collecting shooter, but also of *Radical Fishing* and the upcoming *Luftrausers*. It's been enough of a problem to prompt retribution in the form of *Vlambeer Clone Tycoon*, a parodic protest made by some of the team's friends.

You play an unimaginative and lazy bedroom coder setting out to clone Vlambeer's games, reasoning that because they're indie, they won't have the legal budget to fight you. Starting on the game's Desktop screen, your first port of call is the web browser, where you can scan for news of upcoming releases. Find some, and you can open Game Faker Pro 3000, the primary tool for your "work."

The goal is to put in the least amount of effort, which often means releasing unfinished games so as to beat the prolific Vlambeer. Do well and your mailbox will fill with unhappy customers and irate developers. The only winning move is not to play. **PS**

MACHINIMA

ROLL OUT THE RED CARPET FOR THE SAXXY AWARDS 2013

Valve recently announced the winners of its annual machinima awards. The Saxxy's started life as a competition for the best *Team Fortress 2* videos. Thanks to the release of the Source Filmmaker, it's transformed into a celebration of the skill and creativity of its community of animators. See the full nominations at *www.bit.ly/Saxxy2013*. **PS**

1 Mann Co. Symphony
With no musical category, The Mann Co. Symphony had to battle for Best Short. Through a melody of lasers, launchers and melee thwacks, it was more than up to the task.
www.bit.ly/Saxxy13a

2 Chinatown Getaway
It's little trouble in Little China, as the Scout steals valuable intel from a local Spy boss. This was a deserving winner of the Best Action category.
www.bit.ly/Saxxy13t

3 Disruption
From the music and moody lighting at the start, you'd be forgiven for thinking this belongs in the Best Drama category. Stick with it, and you'll see why it won the Best Comedy instead.

4 Lil' Guardian Pyro
What happens when you put a Pyro plushie in charge of sentry defense? You get an unbearably cute action film, for one thing. You also get the Overall Winner of this year's Saxxy awards.

BOT MATCH

PLAY MECH SHOOT **HAWKEN** GETS AN ON CHA GE *by Andy Kelly*

READ ME

FIRST REVIEWED
March 2013,

DEVELOPER
Meteor Entertainment

PUBLISHER
Meteor Entertainment

REQUIRES
2GHz dual core CPU, 3GB RAM, 1GB graphics card

LINK
www.playhawken.com

COMMUNITY
community.playhawken.com

Since I reviewed *Hawken* a year ago for *PC Gamer*—awarding it a respectable 79%—it's undergone some pretty big changes. One complaint I had was that there was no server browser, which was added in a major patch in February. This update also introduced an improved matchmaking system, along with a whole host of other tweaks. Turrets were added to bases in Siege mode to deter campers, a killcam was included so you could see exactly who just turned you into scrap metal, and kill/death notifications were made clearer. This was the beginning of a year of steady improvements and updates, and it's certainly a better game than it was in December 2012.

March saw the introduction of a new mech, the Raider. Its Blitz ability increases its movement speed, and enables it to fire while boosting for a short period of time, making it ideal for close-range combat and closing gaps quickly. As for weapons, it has a Reflak 35 flak cannon that allows you to bounce projectiles around corners, and a Corsair-KLA that can sling grenades. The Raider update also added taunts, altered the falloff damage of rockets to make it easier to hit enemies with splash damage, and changed the way suicides work. The last one to damage a player who suicides gets the XP, as long as they're within the 10 second assist window. Finally, the March update added a nemesis system, similar to domination in *Team Fortress 2*.

Technical support

The Technician mech, added in April, was notable for being the game's first support bot, its skills and weapons skewed towards helping your team. Its Helix repair torch acts in much the same way as *Battlefield*'s repair tool, healing friendly mechs and damaging foes. Activate the new Amplification ability and the repair rate is increased for a few seconds. You're also able to debuff enemies with the Redox-02, making them briefly more vulnerable to damage, and this stacks up to three times.

This was the beginning of a year of steady improvements.

This update also added the Blockade, an item enabling you to drop a wall of cover invulnerable to weapon and mech damage, but only for a few seconds. Handy for quick escapes. To top it all off, a new map, Front Line, was released. Set under a bright blue sky—unusual for the otherwise bleak *Hawken*—this city-based map features tunnels snaking towards a large central area. Long, open areas and raised highways make it especially good for snipers.

Another new map was introduced in the May update. Facility is a base in the middle of a desert filled with, curiously, floating rocks. A raised platform in the center is a haven for snipers, but a concealed jump pad in the tunnels below gives other players the chance for a surprise attack. This update also gave all mechs an additional 50 armor points, to make firefights last longer, as well as the ability to use taunts on the end of match screen. Visual feedback was also improved graphics tweaks including better rocket trails and sexier explosions.

June's Heatsink update changed the rhythm of the game dramatically. Every sustained weapon—sub-machineguns, assault rifles, etc.—received notable heating reductions, so they could be fired for longer. Like the armor increase, this was intended to make battles last longer, with less time spent running away to wait for your guns to cool down, or to repair.

More recently, the September Ascension update overhauled pilot and mech progression. Pilot level is now determined by XP earned across all of the mechs you own. A long-awaited party system was also added for teaming up with friends. New content came in the form of Last Eco, a lush green forest filled with caves and canyons, and a good excuse to equip some jungle camo. It's a map with a lot of verticality, and hidden snipers often lurk in the treetops.

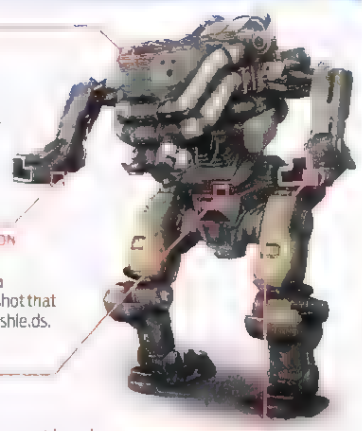
Ascension also added a new mech: the Vanguard. It can switch into turret mode for heavy defenses and increased weapon damage at the expense of movement—but with more mobility than other heavy turret modes. This makes it suited to holding choke points, but it takes extra damage from behind, so don't get flanked. Other updates include TDM matches reduced from 15 to 12 minutes, and from 50 kills to 40, and battleship armor increased in Siege mode. Meteor is making fundamental changes to the pace of the game, even now. It also introduced the passive Regenerator item, which reduces cooldown on other items.

Get to the chopper

The most recent update is Invasion, which added Co-op Bot Destruction mode. Think *TF2*'s Mann vs Machine, but automachines. Players team up to fight 25 waves of increasingly aggressive "rogue AI," and can gather EU from defeated enemies to upgrade their core systems. But Invasion's highlight is the Predator. Like its 1980s sci-fi namesake, this mech can turn invisible and see through walls, but with reduced overall vision. A perfect fit for the Last Eco map.

That's a remarkable number of updates and additions for a year, and the game is still improving. It lacks some of the magic of other online shooters, but I still love stomping around in its mechs. If Meteor keeps up this incredible pace, *Hawken* is going to be something special in 2014.

"IF IT BLEEDS..." Meet the Predator



ITEM
Disruptor
A flashbang for robots. Disrupts vision of anyone within radius.

PRIMARY WEAPON
Breacher
A cannon firing a chargeable rail shot that can cut through shields.

ABILITY
Stalker
Makes you nearly invisible and masked from radar, except when boosting, using items, or firing. Vision obscured, but enemies highlighted in red.

SECONDARY WEAPON
EOC Predator
Proximity mine launcher. You can detonate up to ten mines at once.

The thick jungle foliage in Last Eco is perfect for snipers.

This starter CR-T doesn't stand a chance against my rocketeer.

I'm in turret mode, so I have the upper hand against this rocketeer.

Occasionally the matchmaker has trouble finding players.

Press J on the end-of-match screen to taunt other players.

One of the many custom paint jobs available in the store.

This, uh, *thing* stalks James as he explores Silent Hill.

Subversion of traditional game design is a crucial part of it.

SILENT HILL 2

READ ME

FIRST REVIEWED
Jan 2003, -

DEVELOPER
Team Silent

PUBLISHER
Konami

RELEASE
2003

Having finished *Silent Hill 2* more times than I can remember, I know what lies around every corner, but the atmosphere is so thick and oppressive, I still can't play it for more than an hour at a time. This is partly down to the filthy, flyblown grime of its hospital corridors and fogbound streets, which seems to seep through your monitor. But mostly it's because of how it *sounds*.

The audio design is rarely talked about with the same adoration as the wonderfully dark story and surreal, twisted art style, but it's just as important. Audio director Akira Yamaoka used sound and music in interesting, unusual ways to create an air of both low-key melancholy and gnawing terror—whether it's a lonely, solemn piano playing after a particularly harrowing moment in the story, or the sound of some unfathomable horror lurking in the shadows.

If you haven't played *Silent Hill 2*—and I don't blame you, because the PC version is difficult to track down—the game stars James Sunderland who receives a letter from his wife, Mary, who died three years earlier. She says she's in the town of Silent Hill, in their "special place," and James travels there to meet her only to discover that the town is abandoned and crawling with bizarre creatures. It's one of the best videogame stories ever told, with unforgettable twists and turns that wouldn't dream of spoiling, it sidesteps the series' bloated mythology of cults and magic to tell a tragic, human, and oddly romantic tale.

Radio waves

Sound contributes to the action as well as the atmosphere. When monsters are nearby, James's radio shrieks with static, a sound that makes you instinctively grit your teeth and prime your weapon for whatever abomination's waiting in the mist. But later in the game, while exploring a Civil War era prison buried deep beneath the town, the static begins to crackle—and there's nothing there. Team Silent regularly subvert your expectations like this, but only very subtly. It isn't just unnerving, it reinforces the idea that you're playing a character who may not be entirely sane.

Subversion of traditional game design is a crucial part of *Silent Hill 2*'s black magic. For the first 30 minutes all you do is run down a seemingly endless path, through a fog-cloaked forest. Occasionally you'll hear a distant growl, or branches snapping, and with every step you grow more fearful of what lies ahead. Later, you climb down a set of stairs that seems to go on forever, deeper and deeper into the earth, and the lower you go, the more intense the sinister groaning of some horrible machine gets. Remember, this wasn't an indie game, but a big budget production that sold 1.5 million copies. Can you imagine a major publisher taking a risk on such a bizarre, slow-paced game today? (Then again, take a peek at our *Alien: Isolation* feature in this issue.)

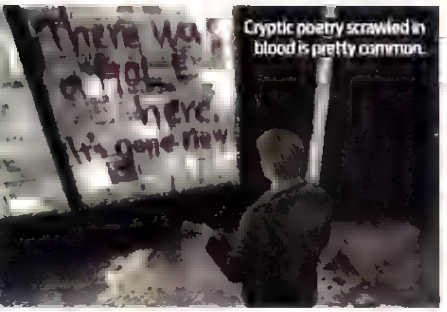
"Play with headphones if you can handle the fear."

The gloomy forest hike features one of the game's neatest audio tricks. As you're walking through the fog, you hear footsteps behind you crunching in the dirt. You stop, and so do the footsteps. You turn around and, of course, there's nothing there. *Slenderman*, anyone?

In another scene you find yourself in the center of a large courtyard, when suddenly you hear the sound of a horse galloping around you. It's totally unexpected, utterly inexplicable, and weirdly unsettling.

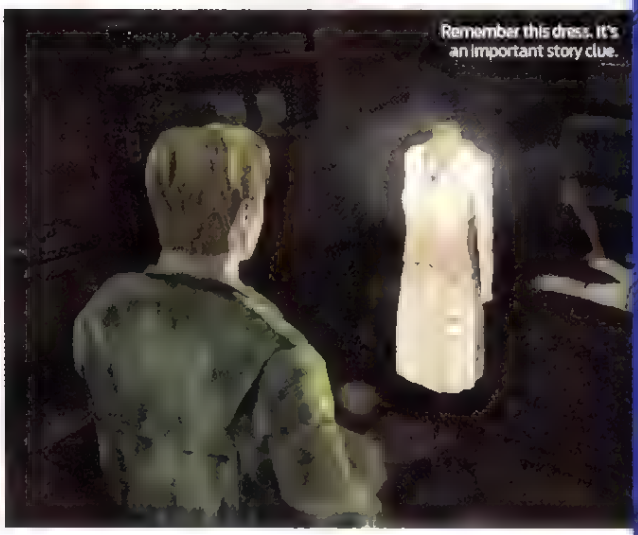
In an apartment that you visit early on in the game, the room is totally silent except for a faint, eerie whispering that's mixed so

Maria's similarity to James's late wife is a central mystery.


Cryptic poetry scrawled in blood is pretty common.

Your first weapon: a plank with some nails sticking out of it.

If it's disgusting, James will stick his hand in it.


Remember this dress. It's an important story clue.

...ow you wonder if you're actually hearing t... at all or if the game has finally destroyed your nerves.

Yamaoka's score is perfect and one of the few game soundtracks I can listen to as a regular album. The music selection, ranging from Nine Inch Nails-style industrial noise to gentle ambience and melodic American folk-tinged rock, is even within this broad spread of genres it's totally consistent with the mood and tone of the story. Whenever I listen to it, it's been on my various iPods for almost a decade, I'm instantly transported to those misty streets.

There's a clear *Twin Peaks* influence in the music, which also extends to the idea of an everyday American town concealing dark otherworldly secrets. Team Silent's influences are diverse, from the films of David Lynch to the monochromatic abstract paintings of Francis Bacon. The town streets are all named after horror writers and the disturbing otherworld alternate reality heralded by the wail of an air raid siren is clearly influenced by the overlooked horror classic Jacob's Ladder.

When it was released in 2003, *Silent Hill 2* ran poorly on most PCs. On today's very different hardware it's surprising how well even on Windows 7 it's almost impossible to make sure you download the resolution patch (Google it) so you can run the game in modern resolutions. At 1080p it looks surprisingly good, the low-res textures only adding to the grubbiness of the world. The lighting is still impressive, the long, dynamic shadows dancing around the room as you swing your flashlight around.

It wouldn't be a good *game* if the controls weren't clunky, the camera twitchy and the puzzles obtuse. But overlook that and you'll find one of the most affecting and atmospheric horror experiences on PC. In a weird way, the clumsy combat makes it scarier. James is just a regular guy, so it makes sense that he isn't a crack shot.

If you like horror or just want to be told an emotional story, you should book a vacation in Silent Hill as soon as possible. And if you've played it before, it's worth experiencing at least once more. The big reveal at the end catches you completely off guard and makes you question everything that's happened up until that point. You'll never forget your first journey into the eerie, broken town.

FEAR FACTOR *Silent Hill 2*'s monsters, and what they symbolize

Lying figure
A hospital patient squirming in agony. A manifestation of James's internal suffering.

Mannequin
Its twisted and strangely feminine limbs represent James's sexual frustration.

Abstract daddy
A suggestive shape that represents Angela's abuse as a child by her father.

Nurse
A nurse with a bulbous growth on its head. Symbolizes Mary's terminal illness.

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The Hard Stuff

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE

BUYER'S ADVICE

GPUS

How to get the best high-res graphics card for your money ***by Dave James***

GPU>

4K>

FPS>

Right now we're at an intriguing point in PC technology, where product cycles are lengthening and the prices of top-end components are dropping as they do. In the GPU world that means that costs of incredible high-res graphics cards are falling almost daily. Over the next four pages I've reviewed a selection of the best of those cards.

How powerful of a card do I need?
How much can you afford? The more powerful your graphics card, the smoother your gaming experience is going to be and the higher you can push the in-game settings.

Yet there are limits to this. Pretty much any $200-odd GPU is capable of delivering decent performance at 1080p, so if you're just going to be running with that as your native resolution then you're going to get diminishing returns as you go up through the graphics card price bands. A $700 card may offer 100fps at 1080p, but you don't really need more than the smooth 60fps you can get with a cheaper option.

So what's the point in these pricey graphics cards, then?
This is where the higher native resolutions come in. If you want to move up to a larger screen—say, 27 to 30 inches—you're looking at either 2560x1440 or 2560x1600. Both resolutions demand a lot more GPU power because of the extra pixels.

Also, now that stereoscopic 3D has fallen by the wayside, much of the techno-babble has turned to 4K gaming—those ultra HD resolutions like 3840x2160. Requiring expensive screens and crazy GPU ability, 4K may take a while to get any traction, but 27-to-30 inch monitors aren't going to stay at 2560x1440.

Is the GPU the only component that can affect gaming performance?
No, and this is where we have to start talking about balance again. When building $700 gaming rigs (or even a Steam Machine), it's all about balancing the components to give the GPU the best shot at the highest framerates without the processor bottlenecking the system. If you've got a weak dual-core AMD chip, then you're not going to get the best out of your GPU. You can't just throw high-res GPU power at a low-end system and hope for the best. Your best bet is at least either a six-core AMD FX chip or Intel quad-core from the last couple of generations.

Which do I buy, AMD or Nvidia?
That is a good question, and the passion displayed by fanboys of either side can be frightening. Both sides still make great graphics cards, but increasingly, Nvidia makes the more efficient, quiet, and cool cards, while AMD is more brute force hotter, louder, but faster.

My advice is to look at both manufacturers on a card-by-card basis. If one card offers the performance and price you want, don't worry about whether it has green or red coloring. ■

GROUP TEST

GPUS

Seven hi-res graphics cards reviewed and compared ***by Dave James***

Synthetic performance >

Resolution >

Gaming performance >

Radeon R9 290

AMD

For much of the last few generations of graphics cards, AMD has been the value option, offering decent price versus performance, while Nvidia took all the fastest-graphics-card-in-the world accolades. With its latest pair of cards, however, based on the new Hawaii GPU, AMD has started competing on both fronts.

The R9 290X was released first, taking on Nvidia's GTX 780 and GTX Titan cards, and for the most part coming out on top. Hot on its heels came this second-tier Hawaii card. It must have made anyone who paid $550 for a 290X a little sick.

"The sort of hi-res performance you can get from the R9 290 is unprecedented."

The straight R9 290 is around $150 cheaper and performs almost identically. Sure, you're losing 256 Radeon cores and with those another 16 texture units, but you're still getting the full 512-bit memory interface for a huge 4GB of GDDR5 video memory running at up to 5Gbps. At this high end a few missing shaders won't change much.

I saw a drop of only 10 percent at worst from the scores of the R9 290X in its high-performance, stupidly loud, "Uber mode," which means the 290 is pretty much in parity with the 290X when it's running in "Quiet mode." It's also as quiet in standard mode as the 290X is in Quiet mode, although that's still noisy.

At $400 it's a relatively sensibly priced high-end graphics card, too. This is the sort of money I used to expect a top-end card to cost, before the prices went silly and we were suddenly supposed to pay $1,000 for an "enthusiast class" card.

The sort of high-res performance you can get from the R9 290 is unprecedented—and, while we're talking about enthusiast class cards, there are times when this card will actually outperform a Titan. In *Company of Heroes 2*, *Total War: Rome II*, and *Metro: Last Light*, the R9 290 actually manages faster average framerates at 2560x1600 on those games' top settings. Considering it's still around half the price of the increasingly irrelevant Titan, those are some pretty astonishing figures.

Some will complain that the 290 still gets far too hot, and at 93C it does get a little toasty—I wouldn't welcome that in a cramped case. But my sample runs stable at that temperature and I'm sure that a good third-party cooler would take care of the noise issues of AMD's unremarkable example.

Personally, I'm more than happy to forgive some noise and temperature issues in return for incredible high-resolution gaming performance at a fraction of the price we've been expected to fork out for those enthusiast class cards. Put simply, this is one of the finest graphics cards I've tested in years.

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

VERDICT

A staggeringly speedy graphics card with an unbeatable price tag. It's quieter than the 290X and performs just as well.

PC GAMER 95

PRICE ◆ **GPU** Hawaii Pro ◆ **Radeon cores** 2,560 ◆ **Core clock** up to 947Hz ◆ **Memory** 4GB GDDR5 ◆ **Memory bus** 512-bit ◆ **ROPs** 64

GeForce GTX 780 Ti

Nvidia

No one expected Nvidia to waste any time responding to AMD's Hawaii-based graphics cards, and sure enough, not a week after the release of the R9 290 the new GTX 780 appeared.

No one expected Nvidia to let AMD keep the "fastest-graphics-card" title for long, either. Nvidia has obviously tweaked the GTX 780 Ti to make sure that it can beat the R9 290X on most points, and by and large it has succeeded.

I've been waiting to see the GPU at the heart of the GTX 780 Ti for a while. It may ostensibly be using the same GK110 GPU as the GTX Titan, GTX 780, and the Tesla K20 and K20X professional cards, but those weren't using the full power of the top Kepler architecture.

The full GK110 GPU has 15 of Nvidia's SMX modules, each housing 192 CUDA cores. The GTX Titan and top pro card, the K20X, still only uses 14 SMX modules. This is down to chip yields: initially yields of the fully functional core were relatively small, but GPUs that failed to make the grade with the full 15 SMX count could still be sold, and were. Now the production process has matured enough and Nvidia should be able to produce fully functioning GK110 cores in decent numbers.

This is the advantage Nvidia had waiting in the wings. The GTX 780 Ti is now the fastest card around. At stock speeds it's not faster by much, barely a few fps, which might lead a cynical reviewer to conclude that Nvidia has won the benchmark battle but lost the war. The GTX 780 Ti's overclocking performance, however, is unbelievable. I pushed my GPU past 1250MHz—which puts clear daylight between the top AMD and Nvidia graphics cards.

At $700 it's still a hugely expensive card, and it's difficult to see the premium as worth it. But where the Titan was once the aspirational GPU for legions of gamers, now the GTX 780 Ti will be that card. It's faster, cooler, and quieter than the AMD cards, and for some gamers, that really will be all the justification they need.

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

The GTX 780 Ti will be the fastest graphics card you've ever had, but you'll need to overclock it to justify the expense

PC GAMER 91

◆ **GPU** GK110 ◆ **Radeon cores** 2880 ◆ **Core clock** 875MHz ◆ **Memory** 3GB GDDR5 ◆ **Memory bus** 384-bit ◆ **ROPs** 48

Radeon R9 290X

AMD

When I first ran benchmarks on the Radeon R9 290X I got excited that AMD had suddenly created a graphics card that could take on the finest of what Nvidia—at the time—could offer and come out on top. Since that initial launch, however, other cards have scuffed much of the shine off.

At first, the new Hawaii XT GPU, with its 2,816 Radeon cores, 4GB GDDR5, and 512-bit bus, was every bit the new top dog. It was faster than the competing GTX 780 and in a lot of cases faster even than the hugely more expensive GTX Titan. Despite the fact it was designed to hit 95C as a target temperature or that, at 55 percent fan speed, it sounded like a storm was kicking off inside your computer, it produced gaming benchmark figures that made the tech world sit up and take notice.

Then Nvidia slashed the price of the GTX 780 by $150. The mighty 290X didn't look like such great value when the cooler, quieter, and less power-hungry card was significantly cheaper. In response, AMD released the R9 290 at an incredible price, $150 cheaper than the 290X. The minimal performance difference between the two cards made that price gap even more stark.

AMD probably didn't want to release the 290 priced quite so low its hand was forced. But once you factor in the release of the GTX 780 Ti above, which topples the R9 290X from its fastest-graphics-card roost, it becomes very hard to recommend that anybody purchase this hot, loud, and expensive beast.

So I don't recommend it. If you want the fastest, Nvidia's cards will offer that for a little more cash, but with a saving in power draw, temperature, and noise complaints from your neighbors. And if you want to save some money, the straight R9 290 will deliver fantastic performance for a lot less cost. I'm used to seeing a top graphics card superseded and slink off to obsolescence, but never as quickly as the 290X has fallen from grace. Honestly, I pity anyone who paid full price for one.

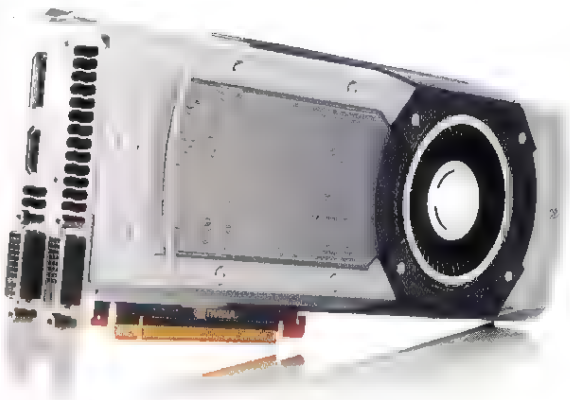
Once great, but only for a little more than a week. Now the 290X is expensive, hot, and for the most part unnecessary

PC GAMER 74

◆ **GPU** Hawaii XT ◆ **Radeon cores** 2816 ◆ **Core clock** Up to 1GHz ◆ **Memory** 4GB GDDR5 ◆ **Memory bus** 512-bit ◆ **ROPs** 64

GeForce GTX 780

Nvidia



The volatile nature of the graphics card market around the time that new cards are released can sometimes mean that older cards suddenly get a sort of GPU Indian Summer.

The recent price drop of the GTX 780 for example, that came in the wake of the 290X's release, placed it at the $500 mark for the first time, making it an impressively good-value graphics card. For a little while, anyway. But then AMD's second-tier Hawaii card arrived, providing another huge cost saving.

The GTX 780 has once again faded into obscurity. For the same reason there is no point picking up the top 290X, there's no reason to buy a GTX 780. The cheaper AMD card wins across the board, and those issues with temperature and noise pale in comparison to the high-resolution performance you can squeeze out of the $400 Radeon.

The GK 110 GPU at its heart is only a shade inferior to the GTX Titan's chip, but still feels a long way off the full version in the GTX 780 Ti. With just 12 SMX units making up its 2,304 CUDA cores—compared with the 2,688 of the GTX Titan—it's a good way behind the 2880 cores of the GTX 780 Ti. And in performance terms that translates to a hefty framerate deficit.

That's not to say the GTX 780 isn't still a quality card at the high resolutions of 2560x1600 or 2560x1440, but there are far better ways to get your rig up to speed if you're gaming with a massive screen. Nvidia has faster options that nail the high resolution gaming spectacle and AMD can offer this sort of performance for much less cash.

The GTX 780 may be the cheapest way to pick up a GK 110 GPU, but the lack of any real performance benefits over the competition render that irrelevant. I'd still choose it over a 290X, but neither really stand out against the fastest GeForce card and the amazing-value R9 290. ■

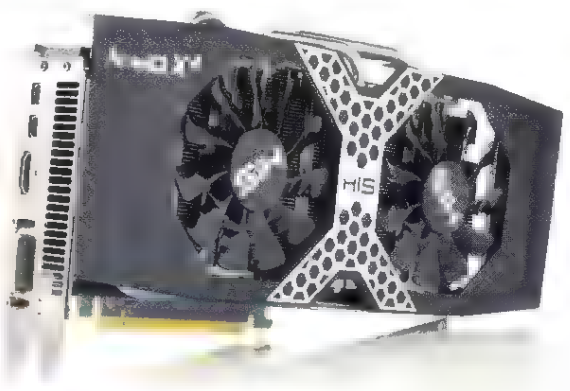
Still a quality GPU for high-res gaming, but the comparative price to performance metrics make it impractical

PC GAMER 81

◆ **CPU** GK110 ◆ **CUDA cores** 2,304 ◆ **Core clock** 863MHz ◆ **Memory** 3GB GDDR5 ◆ **Memory bus** 384-bit ◆ **ROPs** 48

Radeon R9 280X

AMD



Ah, the almost inevitable GPU rebrand. It's something we've become accustomed to over the years, from both AMD and Nvidia, but still not something I can condone. This particular card has been given the same naming convention as the new R9 series, which have actual new GPUs, but it's little more than a rebranded HD 7970 GHz edition. It creates the impression that AMD has been doing something new with its Tahiti GPU when it hasn't.

However, regardless of my feelings about rebranding, objectively speaking this is a great little card. It's an HD 7970 GHz edition for just $300, which is incredible.

This is a mid-priced card more than capable of providing decent gaming framerates at 2560x1600 resolution. You may not be able to play *all* the latest games at their highest settings, with 4x anti-aliasing switched on, but you'll get mighty close. The 280X is a card that will happily deliver over 30fps in *Battlefield 4* at its top settings, while its minimum framerates are still in the mid-20s. That's extremely impressive for a $300 card. You'll struggle at those rarified resolutions with some of the more intensive games, such as *Metro* or *Rome II*, but in console-friendly ones like *BioShock Infinite* or *Grid 2*, you'll be able to nail buttery smooth framerates with this bargain of a graphics card.

Interestingly it's also a bit of a switcheroo in terms of the Nvidia competition. The GTX 770, now its direct competitor, may have a sleek and sexy cooler, which can run quieter than AMD's stock cooler, but it does run hotter than the 280X. If only AMD could have managed that trick on the R9 290.

The current pricing of the R9 280X makes it a great option for a budget high res setup. If you want to ensure that your games look their best, you probably don't want to spend any less—particularly if you're not looking to upgrade for a while. ■

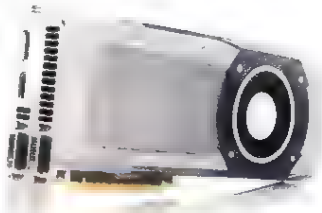
A great budget option for a decent high-res gaming rig. It will deliver good framerates with few sacrifices needed

PC GAMER 87

◆ **GPU** Tahiti XT ◆ **Radeon cores** 2,048 ◆ **Core clock** Up to 1GHz ◆ **Memory** 3GB GDDR5 ◆ **Memory bus** 384-bit ◆ **ROPs** 32

GeForce GTX 770

Nvidia



Here I'm a little less down on the rebranding process. The GTX 770 is really a GTX 680, but it has launched at a much lower price than the original and with improved power/turbo boost performance. It's an improved version of Nvidia's last-gen, and for $330 that isn't bad.

It is, however, going head-to-head with AMD's top card of their own last generation, the HD 7970 GHz rebranded as the 280X. That was a battle it couldn't win last time around and nothing's changed now.

It's only in overall power use and *BioShock Infinite* that the Nvidia card excels. For everything else in our benchmarking suite it's the AMD card that wins. In general only by a few frames per second, but these are high-resolution benchmarks and the numbers are already relatively low. When you're talking about the difference between 41 and 42fps at 1080p that's practically undetectable, but when it's 25 and 28fps at 2560x1600 you're getting into non-playable vs. playable territory.

The GTX 770 also has lower minimum framerates and those can be more game-spoiling than higher average numbers. And again, we're talking about low figures at high-res settings, so we want them to be at least in doubles figures. Which is where the GTX 770 just loses out to the 280X.

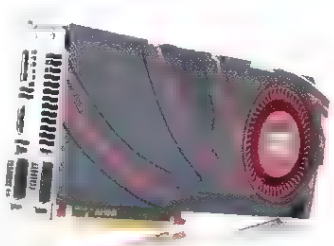
At this low level of high resolution graphics cards the smallest of margins can make all the difference, and here it's the GTX 770 that suffers. ■

PC GAMER 79

◆ **GPU** GK104 ◆ **Radeon cores** 1536 ◆ **Core clock** 1046MHz ◆ **Memory** 2GB GDDR5 ◆ **Memory bus** 256-bit ◆ **ROPs** 32

Radeon R9 270X

AMD



Dropping below $300 for a graphics card in a high-resolution rig is a step too far down Austerity St. That's ably demonstrated here. The R9 270X is the bottom of AMD's R9 series and struggles to generate playable framerates at the top resolutions we're looking at.

The Curacao XT GPU at the 270X's heart is very similar to the Pitcairn XT of the HD 7870 GHz card from the previous generation. So it still has 1,280 Graphics Core Next Radeon cores and operates at 1GHz for its core clock speed, but like that previous chip it can't cope at the top table of resolutions.

Things don't look too bad if you go for games like *BioShock Infinite* and *Grid 2*. There I got 31 and 48fps on average at the top settings. That's a great start and suddenly $200 looks like a steal. But in *Company of Heroes 2*, *Rome II*, and *Metro: Last Light* the minimum framerates achieved by the R9 270X struggle to top 8fps. The *CoH 2* minimum was a sluggish 2fps and that means you're not getting anywhere near a smooth game at the top settings.

Granted, the beauty of PC gaming is that you can choose what graphical settings to sacrifice to balance framerate against visual quality, but you'll sacrifice an awful lot to play at these resolutions on the 270X. And when you've forked out for a 2560x1600 screen, you owe it to yourself to get a graphics card capable of doing it justice. ■

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◆ **GPU** Curacao XT ◆ **Radeon cores** 1280 ◆ **Core clock** up to 1050MHz ◆ **Memory** 2GB GDDR5 ◆ **Memory bus** 256-bit ◆ **ROPs** 32

BENCHMARKS

HI-RES GRAPHICS CARDS COMPARED

The benchmark performances of every graphics card in this round-up

DirectX 11 gaming performance 2560x1600

BioShock Infinite
Minimum fps Average fps *(higher is better)*

Total War: Rome II
Minimum fps Average fps *(higher is better)*

Metro: Last Light
Minimum fps Average fps *(higher is better)*

AMD RADEON R9 290
13 25

NVIDIA GEFORCE GTX 780 TI
14 28

AMD RADEON R9 290X
13 26

NVIDIA GEFORCE GTX 780
13 23

AMD RADEON R9 280X
12 20

NVIDIA GEFORCE GTX 770
12 19

AMD RADEON R9 270X
8

Rig of the Month

We declare war on boring case designs

Last month, we pushed our build into the ultra high-end territory. This month, we're getting more thrifty—and more stylish.

We start with an Intel Core i5 4670K that runs at 3.8Ghz, but overclocks easily. Then we add Gigabyte's UD3H motherboard, that offers plenty of options for expandability and overclocking ease alongside a ton of USB 3.0 ports—you really can't have too many gadgets tendrilling out of your PC.

RAM prices are on the rise, sadly, so we'll stick with the baseline of 8GB of G.Skill Ripjaws memory, which isn't a devastating compromise by any means. For our video card, we'll use EVGA's SuperClocked Nvidia GTX 770. It's a great choice for both performance and price, and will pair well BenQ's 1080p, 27" XL2720T that runs at 120Hz.

But what really makes this month's rig is our case, the Corsair Vengeance C70. Not only does it offer six HDD slots and superb cable management, but it comes in a sweet military green paint job, with carrying handles on top and a giant red power button on the front panel. Try not to make explosion noises when you boot this bad boy up.

Cory Banks
Managing Editor

WHAT'S IN THE BOX

CPU
Intel Core i5 4670K
This unlocked CPU runs at a stock 3.8Ghz, and overclocks like a champ.
FITTED March 2014

MOTHERBOARD
Gigabyte GA-Z87X-UD3H
An SLI-ready, overclock-friendly mobo with 10 USB 3.0 ports
FITTED March 2014

RAM
8GB G.Skill Ripjaws
16GB would be nice, but high prices mean it's better to upgrade later.
FITTED March 2014

CASE
Corsair Vengeance C70
Six HDD bays, great cable management, and a big, red power button. So rad.
FITTED March 2014

STORAGE
Samsung 840 Pro 128GB SSD/2TB Seagate HDD
A fast SSD paired with a dependable 2TB HDD.
FITTED March 2014

CPU COOLER
Cooler Master Hyper 212 Evo
One of the most efficient air coolers on the market
FITTED March 2014

VIDEO CARD
EVGA SuperClocked 770
It doesn't have the flair of a 780 Ti, but this OC'd card is still a beast
FITTED March 2014

POWER SUPPLY
Corsair TX750
A large modular power supply with plenty of juice to run our rig
FITTED March 2014

DISPLAY
BenQ XL2720T 27"
This 1080p panel not only looks great, but runs at 120Hz for smooth gaming
FITTED March 2014

KEYBOARD
Cooler Master QuickFire XT
A full-size Cherry MX Red keyboard that's inexpensive and stylish
FITTED February 2014

MOUSE
Razer Ouroboros
A 8200 DPI mouse with customizable palm rest and interchangeable sides.
FITTED February 2014

HEADSET
SteelSeries Siberia V2
A top-notch pair of headphones that have great audio quality
FITTED February 2014

UPGRADES AND ALTERNATIVES

Corsair RM1000:

R9 290X:

1TB Samsung 840 EVO:

TOTAL PRICE $1,953

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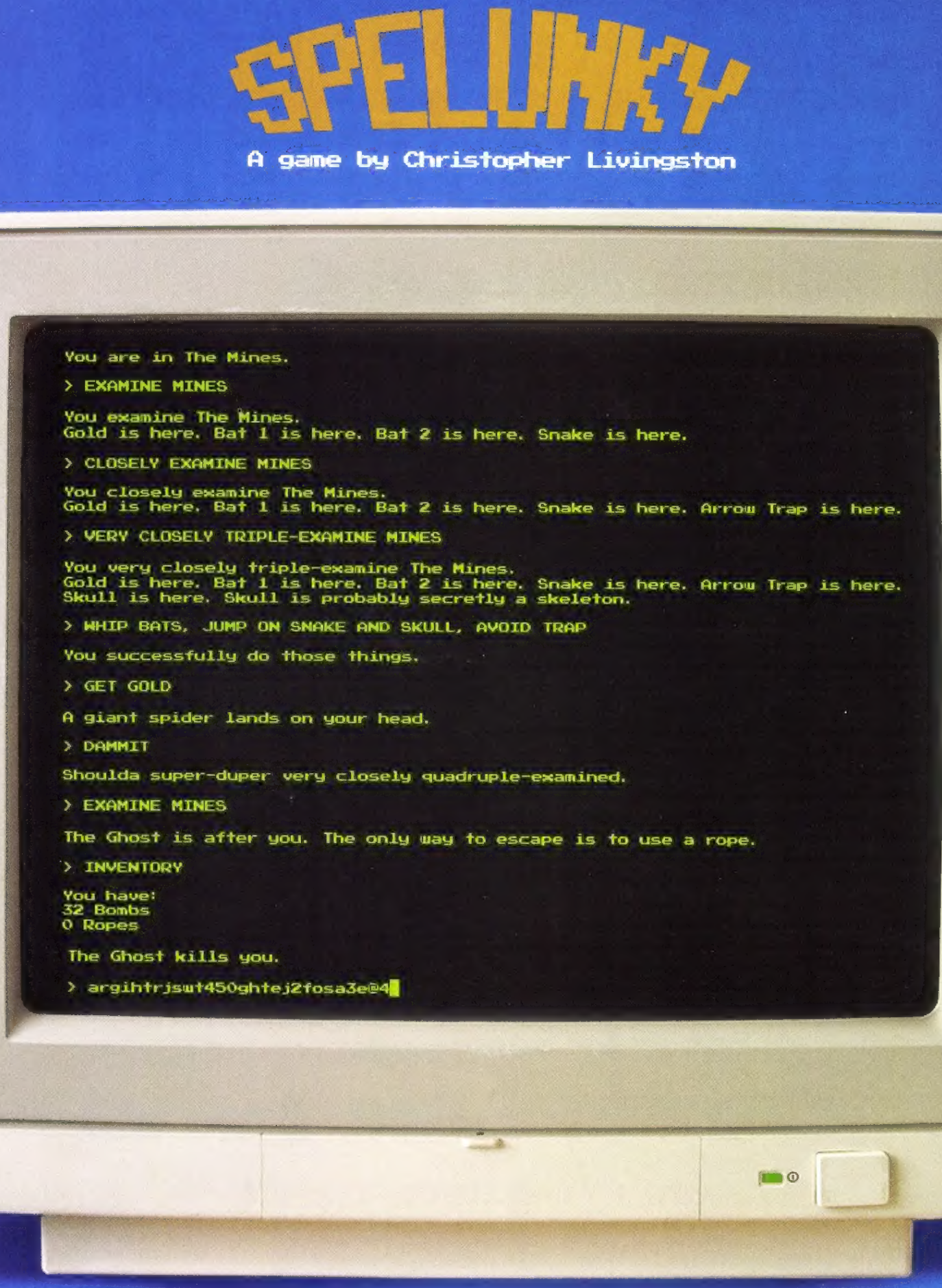
SPELUNKY
A game by Christopher Livingston
You are in The Mines.
> EXAMINE MINES
You examine The Mines.
Gold is here. Bat 1 is here. Bat 2 is here. Snake is here.
> CLOSELY EXAMINE MINES
You closely examine The Mines.
Gold is here. Bat 1 is here. Bat 2 is here. Snake is here. Arrow Trap is here.
> VERY CLOSELY TRIPLE-EXAMINE MINES
You very closely triple-examine The Mines.
Gold is here. Bat 1 is here. Bat 2 is here. Snake is here. Arrow Trap is here.
Skull is here. Skull is probably secretly a skeleton.
> WHIP BATS, JUMP ON SNAKE AND SKULL, AVOID TRAP
You successfully do those things.
> GET GOLD
A giant spider lands on your head.
> DAMMIT
Shoulda super-duper very closely quadruple-examined.
> EXAMINE MINES
The Ghost is after you. The only way to escape is to use a rope.
> INVENTORY
You have:
32 Bombs
0 Ropes
The Ghost kills you.
> argihtrjswt450ghtej2fosa3e@4

0.86 inches thick

weighs only 6lbs

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NVIDIA GEFORCE GTX

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